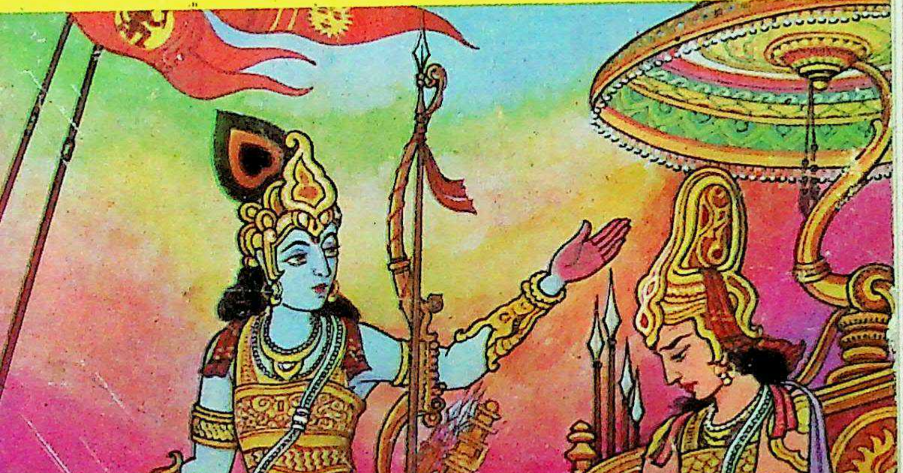
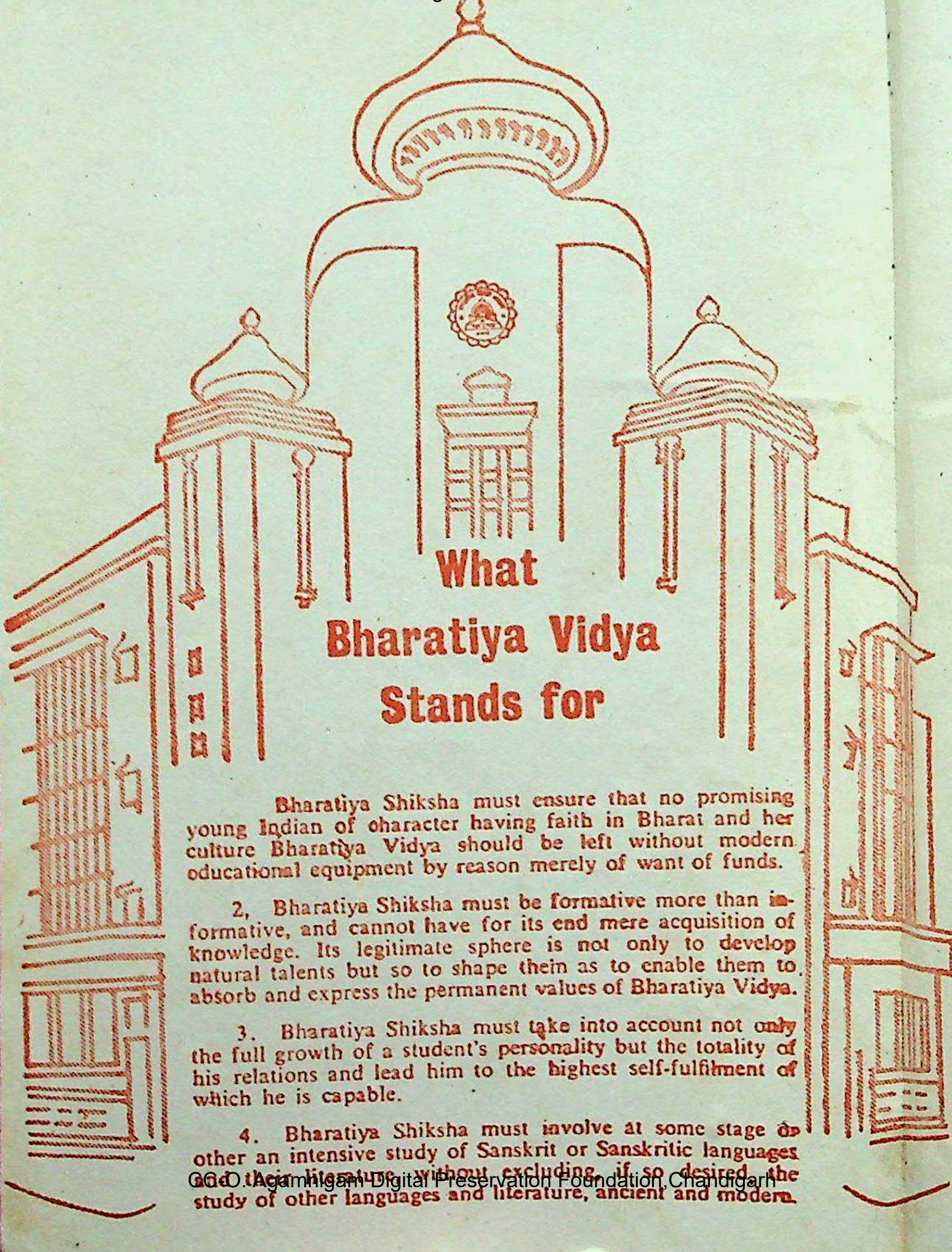
Bhavan's Book University

Mahabharata

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI



BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY



What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharat and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2, Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.

5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, ideas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

7. The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

(a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and

(b) the adoption by the student of the attitude by the development of—

(i) respect for the teacher.

(ii) a spirit of inquiry,

(iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharat and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which is flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form of attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world.

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side.

—Rigveda, 1-89-i.

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

General Editors

R. R. DIWAKAR
S. RAMAKRISHNAN

1

MAHABHARATA

BY

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

OTHER BOOKS BY

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

PUBLISHED BY THE BHAVAN

Ramayana
Rajaji's Speeches Vol. I
Rajaji's Speeches Vol. II
Hinduism : Doctrine and Way of Life
Bhagavad Gita
Stories for the Innocent
Kural—The Great Book of Tiru-Valluvar
Upanishads
Our Culture
Bhaja Govindam
Gandhiji's Teachings & Philosophy
Avvaiar (The Great Tamil Poet)
Kathopanishad (Tamil)
Rescue Democracy From Money Power
Bhagavad Gita (Hindi)
Upanishads (Hindi-Cum-English Edition)
Bhajagovind (Kannada)

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

MAHABHARATA

BY
C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu.
Acc. No 3077 (D)
Dated 3/2/2016

1986
BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN
Kulapati K. M. Munshi Marg
Bombay-400 007

Copyright and rights of translation and reproduction reserved by the Publishers

1st Edition in this Series — 1951
2nd Edition thoroughly revised — 1952
3rd Edition — 1953
4th Edition — 1955
5th Edition — 1958
6th Edition — 1958
7th Edition — 1962
8th Edition — 1966
9th Edition — 1968
10th Edition — 1970
11th Edition — 1972
12th Edition — 1973
13th Edition — 1974
14th Edition — 1975
15th Edition — 1975
16th Edition — 1976
17th Edition — 1976
18th Edition — 1976
19th Edition — 1977
20th Edition -- 1977
21st Edition — 1978
22nd Edition — 1979
23rd Edition — 1980
24th Edition — 1982
25th Edition — 1983
26th Edition — 1985
27th Edition — 1986

Price Rs. 20/-

PRINTED IN INDIA

Printed at Associated Advertisers & Printers, 505, Tardeo Arthur Road
Bombay 400 034, and Published by S. Ramakrishnan, Executive Secretary,
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 400 007.

KULAPATI'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the re-integration of Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:—

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach. In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in

India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life; a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita*, which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

It is not an exaggeration to say that the persons and incidents portrayed in the great literature of a people influence national character no less potently than the actual heroes and events enshrined in its history. It may be claimed that the former play an even more important part in the formation of ideals, which give to character its impulse of growth. Don Quixote, Gulliver, Pickwick, Sam Weller, Sir Roger de Coverley, Falstaff, Shylock, King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, Alice and her wanderings in Wonderland, all these and many such other creations of genius are not less real in the minds of the British people than the men and women who lived and died and lie buried in British soil. Since literature is so vitally related to life and character, it follows that so long as the human family remains divided into nations, the personae and events of one national literature have not an equal appeal to all, because they do not awaken the same associations. A word or phrase about Falstaff or Uncle Toby carries to English men a world of significance which it does not to others. Similarly, a word or phrase about Hanuman, Bhima, Arjuna, Bharata or Sita conveys to us in India, learned and illiterate alike, a significance all its own, of which an English rendering cannot convey even a fraction to outsiders, however interested in Indian mythology and folklore.

In the moving history of our land, from time immemorial great minds have been formed and nourished and touched to heroic deeds by the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In most Indian homes, children formerly learnt these immortal stories as they learnt their mother-tongue—at the mother's knee; and the sweetness and sorrows of Sita and Draupadi, the heroic fortitude of Rama and Arjuna and the loving fidelity of Lakshmana and Hanuman became the stuff of their young philosophy of life.

The growing complexity of life has changed the simple pattern of early home life. Still, there are few in our land who do not know the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, though the stories come to them so embroidered with the garish fancies of the Kalakshepam* and the cinema as to retain but little of the dignity and approach to truth of Vyasa or Valmiki. It occurred to me some years ago that I might employ some of the scanty leisure of a busy life in giving to our Tamil children in easy prose the story of the *Mahabharata* that we, more fortunate in this than they, heard in our homes as children. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* is one of our noblest heritages, and it is my cherished belief that to hear it faithfully told is to love it and come under its elevating influence. It strengthens the soul and drives home—as nothing else does—the vanity of ambition and the evil and futility of anger and hatred. Some years ago, I wrote the story of Sisupala under the caption "Mudal Tambulam" (precedence in Guest-Worship) for a Tamil magazine. The editor liked it so much that he persuaded me to take up the task of giving the whole of the *Mahabharata* to our people in the form of stories. The work, which I began with some diffidence, soon cast its spell on me, and presently I came to love it and imagined myself telling these stories to dear Tamil children, clustering eager-eyed to hear the deeds of the godlike heroes of our motherland. I also hoped that the reading of these stories might enliven village evenings, when rustics gather socially in the chavadi or temple after their day's work is done. I covered the *Mahabharata* in 107 stories. The writing recaptured for me sacred and touching associations which are part of my life; every sentence had for me a fragrance of the living past. This quality can never of course be preserved or brought out in an English translation. All the same, I hope this book will serve some purpose. I did a substantial part of the translation myself, but a great part was done for me by kind friends. I tender my most grateful thanks to Sri P. Seshadri and to Sri S. Krishnamurti, without whose labours this book would not have been possible. Last but not least, I am grateful to Sri Navaratna Rama Rao, whose help by way of careful revision of the entire manuscript is as much a precious memento of personal affection as public service.

---

*A devotional meeting wherein an expert scholar and singer tells a story to his audience.

MADRAS : C. RAJAGOPALACHARI
1st July 1950.

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

THIS is not a reprint but a carefully revised new edition and I once again record my gratitude for the loving care with which Sri Navaratna Rama Rao has helped to bring this about. This book is as much his handiwork as mine, so far as the difficult and delicate task of translation goes. In most translations, as Sir Walter Scott once humorously remarked, the noble transmutation is from gold into lead. If this has not happened in this case, the credit is due to my friend Sri Navaratna Rama Rao.

The realities of life are idealised by genius and given the form that makes drama, poetry or great prose. Since literature is closely related to life, so long as the human family is divided into nations, literature cannot escape the effects of such division. But the highest literature transcends regionalism and through it, when we are properly attuned, we realise the essential oneness of the human family.

The *Mahabharata* is of this class. It belongs to the world and not only to India. To the people of India, indeed, this epic has been an unfailing and perennial source of spiritual strength. Learnt at the mother's knee with reverence and love, it has inspired great men to heroic deeds as well as enabled the humble to face their trials with fortitude and faith.

The *Mahabharata* was composed many thousand years ago. But generations of gifted reciters have added to Vyasa's original a great mass of material. All the floating literature that was thought to be worth preserving, historical, geographical, legendary, political, theological and philosophical, of nearly thirty centuries, found a place in it. In those days, when there was no printing, interpolation in a recognised classic seemed to correspond to inclusion in the national library.

Divested of these accretions, the *Mahabharata* is a noble poem possessing in a supreme degree the characteristics of a true epic, great and fateful movement, heroic characters and stately diction.

The characters in the epic move with the vitality of real life. It is difficult to find anywhere such vivid portraiture on so ample a canvas. Bhishma, the perfect knight; the venerable Drona; the vain but chivalrous Karna; Duryodhana, whose perverse pride is redeemed by great courage in adversity; the high-souled Pandavas, with god-like strength as well as power of suffering; Draupadi, most unfortunate of queens; Kunti, the worthy mother of heroes; Gandhari, the devoted wife and sad mother of the wicked sons of Dhritarashtra—these are some of the immortal figures on that crowded, but never confused, canvas. Then there is great Krishna himself, most energetic of men, whose divinity scintillates through a cloud of very human characteristics. His high purposefulness pervades the whole epic. One can read even a translation and feel the overwhelming power of the incomparable vastness and sublimity of the poem.

The *Mahabharata* discloses a rich civilisation and a highly evolved society which, though of an older world, strangely resembles the India of our own time, with the same values and ideals. India was divided into a number of independent kingdoms. Occasionally, one king, more distinguished or ambitious than the rest, would assume the title of emperor, securing the acquiescence of other royalties, and signalised it by a great sacrificial feast. The adherence was generally voluntary. The assumption of imperial title conferred no overlordship. The emperor was only first among his peers. The art of war was highly developed and military prowess and skill were held in high esteem. We read in the *Mahabharata* of standardised phalanxes and of various tactical movements. There was an accepted code of honourable warfare, deviations from which met with reproof among kshatriyas. The advent of the Kali age is marked by many breaches of these conventions in the Kurukshetra battle, on account of the bitterness of conflict, frustration and bereavements. Some of the most impressive passages in the epic centre round these breaches of dharma.

The population lived in cities and villages. The cities were the headquarters of kings and their household and staff. There were beautiful palaces and gardens and the lives led were cultured and luxurious. There was trade in the cities, but the mass of the people were agriculturists.

Besides this urban and rural life, there was a very highly cultured life in the seclusion of forest recesses, centred round ascetic teachers. These asramas kept alive the bright fires of learning and spiritual thought. Young men of noble birth eagerly sought education at these asramas. World-weary age went there for peace. These centres of culture were cherished by the rulers of the land and not the proudest of them would dare to treat the members of the hermitages otherwise than with respect and consideration.

Women were highly honoured and entered largely in the lives of their husbands and sons. The caste system prevailed, but intercaste marriages were not unknown. Some of the greatest warriors in the *Mahabharata* were brahmanas.

The *Mahabharata* has moulded the character and civilisation of one of the most numerous of the world's people. How did it fulfil—how is it still continuing to fulfil—this function? By its gospel of dharma, which like a golden thread runs through all the complex movements in the epic; by its lesson that hatred breeds hatred, that covetousness and violence lead inevitably to ruin, that the only real conquest is in the battle against one's lower nature.

Indeed the *Mahabharata* has another name known among scholars—JAYA—which means victory, conveying the moral herein indicated. 'Jaya' is the name, by which the work is referred to, in the first invocatory verse of the epic.

If a foreigner reads this book—translation and epitome though it is—and closes it with a feeling that he has read a good and elevating work, he may be confident that he has grasped the spirit of India and can understand her people—high and low, rich and poor.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

MADRAS:
10th January 1952.

PREFACE TO THIRD EDITION

I do not find anything new to say by way of Preface to the Third Edition of this book. One may tour all over India and see all things, but one cannot understand India's way of life unless one has read the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, at least in a good translation.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

MADRAS:
20th December 1952.

PREFACE TO FOURTH EDITION

WITH their characteristic zeal, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan are bringing out a fourth edition of this book. Asked to write something by way of a fresh preface, I think of the days when I first began to write these chapters in Tamil for KALKI. The Congress had then resigned from its position in all the provincial governments and Hitler's war was on. I was in a double wilderness. I remember what great peace I found then in re-reading this great epic of our land and telling it in simple Tamil. This was twelve years ago. Again, in the middle of 1954, when I laid down the office of Chief Minister of Madras after a difficult and critical period of two years, I found the peace that I needed in Valmiki's epic. I re-told the *Ramayana* in weekly chapters to the Tamil people. I have just concluded that work as I write this preface. I have lived a pretty active life. But I feel that these two things that I have done are the best service I have rendered to my people. These two books of mine have been widely read and enjoyed. They have helped the simple folk in the Tamil country to realise their higher selves. Naturally, this has been a source of great joy to me in the evening of my life. It is good to be a political and national worker and to take office and work hard. But I have seen that it is better to be able to leave it and enjoy the company of the sages of our land and to help them to speak to our men and women again.

The English rendering of my *Mahabharata* has been distributed by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan with remarkable success and I tender to them my warm gratitude for this service. The sages of our land had never any thought of land or sea boundaries. They thought in all things for all mankind and we are fulfilling their intention when we render our classics into English in a form suitable for the present-day international world.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

MADRAS:
18th October 1955.

PREFACE TO SIXTH EDITION

I AM grateful to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan which has brought out these fresh reprints of my *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* books. The Bhavan has achieved great success by the very wide distribution organised by it of these two books, which seek to bring Valmiki and Vyasa near to those who have no access to the unrivalled original classics. The characters and incidents of these two *itihasas* have come to be the raw material for the works of numerous poets and saints that came later to write dramas and sing poems and hymns to keep this nation in the straight path. Oral discourses have further played with them in order to entertain and instruct pious audiences and not a few variations and additions have been made to the original. All the languages of India have the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* retold by their poets, with additions and variations of their own. It is good to have the narrative written up for young people as told in the original epics, and these two books of mine seek to serve that object.

I appeal particularly to the young men in schools and colleges to read these books. There is not a page in them but after reading you will emerge with greater courage, stronger will and purer mind. They are not just story books, although they are very good in that way too. They are the records of the mind and spirit of our forefathers who cared for the good, ever so much more than for the pleasant and who saw more of the mystery of life than we can do in our interminable pursuit for petty and illusory achievements in the material plane. We should be thankful to those who preserved for us these many-centuries-old epics in spite of all the vicissitudes through which our nation passed since Vyasa and Valmiki's time. Even the poets who wrote these epics in the original did not create but built out of the inherited bricks of national memory prior to their own time. Reading the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* even in the form I have given them, we go back to live with our ancient forbears and listen to their grand voices.

Mythology is an integral part of religion. It is as necessary for religion and national culture as the skin and skeleton that preserve a fruit with its juice and its taste. Form is no less essential than substance. We cannot squeeze religion and hope to bottle and keep the essence by itself. It would neither be very useful nor last very long. Mythology and holy figures are necessary for any great culture to rest on its stable spiritual foundation and function as a life-giving inspiration and guide.

Let us keep ever in our minds the fact that it is the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them.

I wish I were gifted with greater vision and greater ability so that I could have done this work, to which I was called, better than I have done. I am thankful however for what I have been enabled to do. Thorough familiarity with our ancient heritage is necessary if we desire to preserve our individuality as a nation and serve the world through *dharma* which alone can save mankind from error and extinction.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

MADRAS:
19th October 1958.

CONTENTS

Chapter Page

Ganapati, the Scribe 17
I Devavrata 19
II Bhishma's Vow 22
III Amba and Bhishma 25
IV Devayani and Kacha 28
V The Marriage of Devayani 32
VI Yayati 36
VII Vidura 38
VIII Kunti Devi 40
IX Death of Pandu 42
X Bhima 43
XI Karna 45
XII Drona 48
XIII The Wax Palace 52
XIV The Escape of the Pandavas 54
XV The Slaying of Bakasura 58
XVI Draupadi's Swayamvara 63
XVII Indraprastha 67
XVIII The Saranga Birds 71
XIX Jarasandha 75
XX The Slaying of Jarasandha 77
XXI The First Honour 80
XXII Sakuni Comes In 83

Chapter — Page

XXIII The Invitation .. 85
XXIV The Wager .. 88
XXV Draupadi's Grief .. 92
XXVI Dhritarashtra's Anxiety .. 96
XXVII Krishna's Vow .. 100
XXVIII Pasupata .. 102
XXIX Affliction is Nothing New .. 105
XXX Agastya .. 108
XXXI Rishyasringa .. 112
XXXII Fruitless Penance: Story of Yavakrida .. 116
XXXIII Yavakrida's End .. 118
XXXIV Mere Learning is not Enough .. 120
XXXV Ashtavakra .. 122
XXXVI Bhima and Hanuman .. 124
XXXVII I am no Crane .. 128
XXXVIII The Wicked are Never Satisfied .. 131
XXXIX Duryodhana disgraced .. 133
XL Sri Krishna's Hunger .. 135
XLI The Enchanted Pool .. 138
XLII Domestic Service .. 144
XLIII Virtue Vindicated .. 148
XLIV Matsya Defended .. 152
XLV Prince Uttara .. 156
XLVI Promise Fulfilled .. 160
XLVII Virata's Delusion .. 163

Chapter Page

XLVIII Taking Counsel 167
XLIX Arjuna's Charioteer 172
L Salya against His Nephews 174
LI Vritra 177
LII Nahusha 180
LIII Sanjaya's Mission 183
LIV Not a Needle-Point of Territory 187
LV Krishna's Mission 189
LVI Attachment and Duty 193
LVII The Pandava Generalissimo 196
LVIII The Kaurava Generalissimo 198
LIX Balarama 199
LX Rukmini 200
LXI Non-Co-operation 203
LXII Krishna Teaches 205
LXIII Yudhishthira Seeks Benediction 207
LXIV The First Day's Battle 209
LXV The Second Day 211
LXVI The Third Day's Battle 214
LXVII The Fourth Day 217
LXVIII The Fifth Day 219
LXIX The Sixth Day 222
LXX The Seventh Day 224
LXXI The Eighth Day 227
LXXII The Ninth Day 229

Chapter		Page
LXXIII	The Passing of Bhishma	231
LXXIV	Karna and the Grandsire	233
LXXV	Drona in Command	235
LXXVI	To Seize Yudhishthira Alive	237
LXXVII	The Twelfth Day	240
LXXVIII	Brave Bhagadatta	243
LXXIX	Abhimanyu	247
LXXX	The Death of Abhimanyu	251
LXXXI	A Father's Grief	253
LXXXII	The Sindhu King	256
LXXXIII	Borrowed Armour	260
LXXXIV	Yudhishthira's Misgivings	263
LXXXV	Yudhishthira's Fond Hope	266
LXXXVI	Karna and Bhima	268
LXXXVII	Pledge Respected	271
LXXXVIII	Somadatta's End	274
LXXXIX	Jayadratha Slain	278
XC	Drona Passes Away	281
XCI	The Death of Karna	284
XCII	Duryodhana	287
XCIII	The Pandavas Reproached	291
XCIV	Aswatthama	295
XCV	Avenged	298
XCVI	Who can Give Solace?	299
XCVII	Yudhishthira's Anguish	302

Chapter		Page
XCVIII	Yudhishthira Comforted	304
XCIX	Envy	306
C	Utanga	309
CI	A Pound of Flour	312
CII	Yudhishthira Rules	316
CIII	Dhritarashtra	318
CIV	The Passing Away of the Three	320
CV	Krishna Passes Away	322
CVI	Yudhishthira's Final Trial	324
	Glossary	329

GANAPATI, THE SCRIBE

BHAGAVAN VYASA, the celebrated compiler of the Vedas, was the son of the great sage Parasara. It was he who gave to the world the divine epic of the Mahabharata.

Having conceived the Mahabharata he thought of the means of giving the sacred story to the world. He meditated on Brahma, the Creator, who manifested himself before him. Vyasa saluted him with bowed head and folded hands and prayed :

"Lord, I have conceived an excellent work, but cannot think of one who can take it down to my dictation."

Brahma extolled Vyasa and said: "O sage, invoke Ganapati and beg him to be your amanuensis." Having said these words he disappeared. The sage Vyasa meditated on Ganapati who appeared before him. Vyasa received him with due respect and sought his aid.

"Lord Ganapati, I shall dictate the story of the Mahabharata and I pray you to be graciously pleased to write it down."

Ganapati replied: "Very well. I shall do as you wish. But my pen must not stop while I am writing. So you must dictate without pause or hesitation. I can only write on this condition."

Vyasa agreed, guarding himself, however, with a counter-stipulation: "Be it so, but you must first grasp the meaning of what I dictate before you write it down."

Ganapati smiled and agreed to the condition. Then the sage began to sing the story of the Mahabharata. He would occasionally compose some complex stanzas which would make Ganapati pause a while to get at the meaning and Vyasa would avail himself of this interval to compose many stanzas in his mind. Thus the Mahabharata came to be written by Ganapati to the dictation of Vyasa.

It was before the days of printing, when the memory of the learned was the sole repository of books. Vyasa first taught the great epic to his son, the sage Suka. Later, he expounded it to many other disciples. Were it not so, the book might have been lost to future generations.

Tradition has it that Narada told the story of the Mahabharata to the devas while Suka taught it to the gandharvas, the rakshasas and the yakshas. It is well known that the virtuous and learned Vaisampayana, one of the chief disciples of Vyasa, revealed the epic for the benefit of humanity. Janamejaya, the son of the great King Parikshit, conducted a great sacrifice in the course of which Vaisampayana narrated the story at the request of the former. Afterwards, this story, as told by Vaisampayana, was recited by Suta in the forest of Naimisa to an assembly of sages under the lead of the Rishi Saunaka.

Suta addressed the assembly: "I had the good fortune to hear the story of the Mahabharata composed by Vyasa to teach humanity dharma and the other ends of life. I should like to narrate it to you." At these words the ascetics eagerly gathered round him.

Suta continued: "I heard the main story of the Mahabharata and the episodic tales contained therein told by Vaisampayana at the sacrifice conducted by King Janamejaya. Afterwards, I made an extensive pilgrimage to various sacred places and also visited the battlefield where the great battle described in the epic was fought. I have now come here to meet you all." He then proceeded to tell the whole story of the Mahabharata in the grand assembly.

After the death of the great King Santanu, Chitrangada became King of Hastinapura and he was succeeded by Vichitravirya. The latter had two sons—Dhritarashtra and Pandu. The elder of the two being born blind, Pandu, the younger brother, ascended the throne. In the course of his reign, Pandu committed a certain offence and had to resort to the forest with his two wives where he spent many years in penance.

During their stay in the forest, the two wives of Pandu, Kunti and Madri, gave birth to five sons who became well-known as the five Pandavas. Pandu passed away while they were still living in the forest. The sages brought up the five Pandavas during their early years.

When Yudhishthira, the eldest, attained the age of sixteen the rishis led them all back to Hastinapura and entrusted them to the old grandsire Bhishma.

In a short time the Pandavas gained mastery over the Vedas and the Vedanta as well as over the various arts, especially pertaining to the kshatriyas. The Kauravas, the sons of the blind Dhritarashtra, became jealous of the Pandavas and tried to injure them in various ways.

Finally Bhishma, the head of the family, intervened to bring about mutual understanding and peace between them. Accordingly the Pandavas and the Kauravas began to rule separately from their respective capitals, Indraprastha and Hastinapura.

Some time later, there was a game of dice between the Kauravas and the Pandavas according to the then prevailing kshatriya code of honour. Sakuni, who played on behalf of the Kauravas, defeated Yudhishthira. As a result, the Pandavas had to be in exile for a period of thirteen years. They left the kingdom and went to the forest with their devoted wife Draupadi.

According to the conditions of the game, the Pandavas spent twelve years in the forest and the thirteenth year incognito. When they returned and demanded of Duryodhana their paternal heritage, the latter, who had in the meanwhile usurped their kingdom, refused to return it. War followed as a consequence. The Pandavas defeated Duryodhana and regained their patrimony.

The Pandavas ruled the kingdom for thirty-six years. Afterwards, they transferred the crown to their grandson, Parikshit, and repaired to the forest with Draupadi, all clad humbly in barks of trees.

This is the substance of the story of the Mahabharata. In this ancient and wonderful epic of our land there are many illustrative tales and sublime teachings, besides the narrative of the fortunes of the Pandavas. The Mahabharata is in fact a veritable ocean containing countless pearls and gems. It is, with the Ramayana, a living fountain of the ethics and culture of our Motherland.

CHAPTER I

DEVAVRATA

"YOU must certainly become my wife, whoever you may be." Thus said the great King Santanu to the goddess Ganga who stood before him in human form, intoxicating his senses with her superhuman loveliness.

The king earnestly offered for her love his kingdom, his wealth, his all, his very life.

Ganga replied: "O king, I shall become your wife. But on certain conditions—that neither you nor anyone else should ever ask me who I am, or whence I come. You must also not stand in the way of whatever I do, good or bad, nor must you ever be wroth with me on any account whatsoever. You must not say anything displeasing to me. If you act otherwise, I shall leave you then and there. Do you agree?"

The infatuated king vowed his assent, and she became his wife and lived with him.

The heart of the king was captivated by her modesty and grace and the steady love she bore him. King Santanu and Ganga lived a life of perfect happiness, oblivious of the passage of time.

She gave birth to many children; each new-born babe she took to the Ganges and cast into the river, and then returned to the king with a smiling face.

Santanu was filled with horror and anguish at such fiendish conduct, but suffered it all in silence, mindful of the promise he had made. Often he wondered who she was, wherefrom she had come and why she acted like a murderous witch; still bound by his word, and his all-mastering love for her, uttered no word of blame or remonstrance.

Thus she killed seven children. When the eighth child was born and she was about to throw it into the Ganges, Santanu could not bear it any longer.

He cried: "Stop, stop, why are you bent on this horrid and unnatural murder of your own innocent babes?" With this outburst the king restrained her.

"O great king," she replied, "you have forgotten your promise, for your heart is set on your child, and you do not need me any more. I go. I shall not kill this child, but listen to my story before you judge me. I, who am constrained to play this hateful role by the curse of Vasishtha, am the goddess Ganga, adored of gods and men. Vasishtha cursed the eight Vasus to be born in the world of men, and moved by their supplications said, I was to be their mother. I bore them to you, and well is it for you that it was so, for you will go to higher regions for this service you have done to the eight Vasus. I shall bring up this last child of yours for some time and then return it to you as my gift." After saying these words the goddess disappeared with the child. It was this child who later became famous as Bhishma.

This was how the Vasus came to incur Vasishtha's curse: they went for a holiday with their wives to a mountain tract where stood the hermitage of Vasishtha. One of them saw Vasishtha's cow, Nandini, grazing there. Its divinely beautiful form attracted him and he pointed it out to the ladies. They were all loud in praise of the graceful animal, and one of them requested her husband to secure it for her.

He replied: "What need have we, the devas, for the milk of cows? This cow belongs to the sage Vasishtha who is the master of the whole place. Man will certainly become immortal by drinking its milk; but this is no gain to us, who are already immortal. Is it worth our while incurring Vasishtha's wrath merely to satisfy a whim?"

But she was not thus to be put off. "I have a dear companion in the mortal world. It is for her sake that I make this request. Before Vasishtha returns we shall have escaped with the cow. You must certainly do this for my sake, for it is my dearest wish." Finally her husband yielded. All the Vasus joined together and took the cow and its calf away with them.

When Vasishtha returned to his ashrama, he missed the cow and the calf, because they were indispensable for his daily rituals. Very soon he came to know by his yogic insight all that had taken place. Anger seized him and he uttered a curse against the Vasus. The sage, whose sole wealth was his austerity, willed that they should be born into the world of men. When the Vasus came to know of the curse, repentant too late, they threw themselves on the sage's mercy and implored forgiveness.

Vasishtha said: "The curse must needs take its course. Prabhasa, the Vasu who seized the cow, will live long in the world in all glory, but the others will be freed from the curse as soon as born. My words cannot prove ineffective, but I shall soften the curse to this extent." Afterwards Vasishtha set his mind again on his austerities, the effect of which had been slightly impaired by his anger. Sages who perform austerities acquire the power to curse, but every exercise of this power reduces their store of merit.

The Vasus felt relieved and approached the goddess Ganga and begged of her: "We pray you to become our mother. For our sake we beseech you to descend to the earth and marry a worthy man. Throw us into the water as soon as we are born and liberate us from the curse." The goddess granted their prayer, came to the earth and became the wife of Santanu.

When the goddess Ganga left Santanu and disappeared with the eighth child, the king gave up all sensual pleasures and ruled the kingdom in a spirit of asceticism. One day he was wandering along the banks of the Ganges when he saw a boy endowed with the beauty and form of Devendra, the king of the gods. The child was amusing himself by casting a dam of arrows across the Ganges in flood, playing with the mighty river as a child with an indulgent mother. To the king who stood transfixed with amazement at the sight, the goddess Ganga revealed herself and presented the child as his own son.

She said: "O king, this is that eighth child I bore you. I have brought him up till now. His name is Devavrata. He has mastered the art of arms and equals Parasurama in prowess. He has learnt the Vedas and the Vedanta from Vasishtha, and is well versed in the arts and sciences known to Sukra. Take back with you this child who is a great archer and hero as well as a master in statecraft." Then she blessed the boy, handed him to his father, the king, and disappeared.

CHAPTER II

BHISHMA'S VOW

WITH joy the king received to his heart and his kingdom the resplendent and youthful prince Devavrata and crowned him as the yuvaraja, the heir apparent.

Four years went by. One day as the king was wandering on the banks of the Yamuna, the air was suddenly filled with a fragrance so divinely sweet that the king sought for its cause, and he traced it to a maiden so lovely that she seemed a goddess. A sage had conferred on her the boon that a divine perfume should emanate from her, and this was now pervading the whole forest.

From the moment the goddess Ganga left him, the king had kept his senses under control, but the sight of this divinely beautiful maiden burst the bonds of restraint and filled him with an overmastering desire. He asked her to be his wife.

The maiden said: "I am a fisherwoman, the daughter of the chief of the fishermen. May it please you to ask him and get his consent." Her voice was sweet as her form.

The father was an astute man.

He said: "O king, there is no doubt that this maiden, like every other, has to be married to someone and you are indeed worthy of her. Still you have to make a promise to me before you can have her."

Santanu replied: "If it is a just promise I shall make it."

The chief of the fisherfolk said: "The child born of this maiden should be the king after you."

Though almost mad with passion, the king could not make this promise, as it meant setting aside the godlike Devavrata, the son of Ganga, who was entitled to the crown. It was a price that could not be thought of without shame. He therefore returned to his capital, Hastinapura, sick with baffled desire. He did not reveal the matter to anyone and languished in silence.

One day Devavrata asked his father: "My father, you have all that heart could wish. Why then are you so unhappy? How is it that you are like one pining away with a secret sorrow?"

The king replied: "Dear son, what you say is true. I am indeed tortured with mental pain and anxiety. You are my only son and you are always preoccupied with military ambitions. Life in the world is uncertain and wars are incessant. If anything untoward befalls you our family will become extinct. Of course, you are equal to a hundred sons. Still, those who are well-read in the scriptures say that in this transitory world having but one son is the same as having no son at all. It is not proper that the perpetuation of our family should depend on a single life, and above all things I desire the perpetuation of our family. This is the cause of my anguish." The father prevaricated, being ashamed to reveal the whole story to his son.

The wise Devavrata realised that there must be a secret cause for the mental condition of his father, and questioning the king's charioteer, came to know of his meeting with the fishermaiden on the banks of the Yamuna. He went to the chief of the fishermen and besought his daughter's hand on his father's behalf.

The fisherman was respectful, but firm: "My daughter is indeed fit to be the king's spouse; then should not her son become king? But you have been crowned as the heir-apparent and will naturally succeed your father. It is this that stands in the way."

Devavrata replied: "I give you my word that the son born of this maiden shall be king, and I renounce in his favour my right as heir-apparent," and he took a vow to that effect.

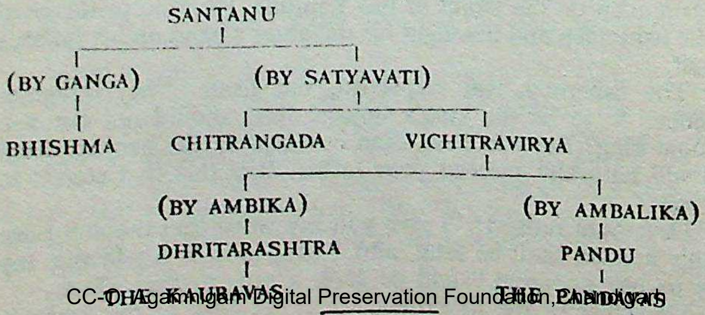
The chief of the fishermen said: "O best of the Bharata race, you have done what no one else born of royal blood has done till now. You are indeed a hero. You can yourself conduct my daughter to the king, your father. Still, hear with patience these words of mine which I say as the father of the girl. I have no doubt you will keep your word, but how can I hope that the children born of you will renounce their birthright? Your sons will naturally be mighty heroes like you, and will be hard to resist if they seek to seize the kingdom by force. This is the doubt that torments me."

When he heard this knotty question posed by the girl's father, Devavrata, who was bent on fulfilling the king's desire, made his supreme renunciation. He vowed with upraised arm to the father of the maiden: "I shall never marry and I dedicate myself to a life of unbroken chastity." And as he uttered these words of renunciation the gods showered flowers on his head, and cries of "Bhishma," "Bhishma" resounded in the air. "Bhishma" means one who undertakes a terrible vow and fulfils it. That name became the celebrated epithet of Devavrata from that time. Then the son of Ganga led the maiden Satyavati to his father.

Two sons were born of Satyavati to Santanu, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, who ascended the throne one after the other. Vichitravirya had two sons, Dhritarashtra and Pandu, born respectively of his two queens, Ambika and Ambalika. The sons of Dhritarashtra, a hundred in number, were known as the Kauravas. Pandu had five sons who became famous as the Pandavas.

Bhishma lived long, honoured by all as the pater-familias until the end of the famous battle of Kurukshetra.

The Family Tree



CHAPTER III

AMBA AND BHISHMA

CHITRANGADA, the son of Satyavati, was killed in battle with a gandharva. As he died childless, his brother, Vichitravirya, was the rightful heir and was duly crowned king, and as he was a minor, Bhishma governed the kingdom in his name till he came of age.

When Vichitravirya reached adolescence Bhishma cast about for a bride for him, and as he heard that the daughters of the king of Kasi were to choose their husbands according to the ancient kshatriya practice he went there to secure them for his brother. The rulers of Kosla, Vanga, Pundra, Kalinga and other princes and potentates had also repaired to Kasi for the swayamvara, attired in their best. The princesses were so far-famed for beauty and accomplishments that there was fierce competition to win them.

Bhishma was famous among the kshatriyas as a mighty man-at-arms. At first everyone thought that the redoubtable hero had come merely to witness the festivities of the swayamvara, but when they found that he was also a suitor, the young princes felt themselves let down and were full of chagrin. They did not know, that he had really come for the sake of his brother, Vichitravirya.

The princes began to cast affronts at Bhishma: "This most excellent and wise descendant of the Bharata race forgets that he is too old and forgets also his vow of celibacy. What has this old man to do with this swayamvara? Fie on him!" The princesses who were to choose their husbands barely glanced at the old man and looked away.

Bhishma's wrath flamed up. He challenged the assembled princes to a trial of their manhood and defeated them all, and taking the three princesses in his chariot he set out for Hastinapura. But before he had gone far, Salva, the king of the Saubala country who was attached to Amba, intercepted and opposed him, for that princess had mentally chosen Salva as her husband. After a bitter fight Salva was worsted, and no wonder, as Bhishma was a peerless bowman, but at the request of the princesses Bhishma spared his life.

Arriving in Hastinapura with the princesses, Bhishma made preparations for their marriage to Vichitravirya. When all were assembled for the marriage, Amba smiled mockingly at Bhishma and addressed him as follows: "O son of Ganga, you are aware of what is enjoined in the scriptures. I have mentally chosen Salva, the king of Saubala, as my husband. You have brought me here by force. Knowing this, do what you, learned in the scriptures, should do."

Bhishma admitted the force of her objection and sent her to Salva with proper escort. The marriage of Ambika and Ambalika, the two younger sisters, with Vichitravirya was duly solemnised.

Amba went rejoicing to Salva and told him what had happened: "I have mentally chosen you as my husband from the very start. Bhishma has sent me to you. Marry me according to the sastras."

Salva replied: "Bhishma defeated me in sight of all, and carried you away. I have been disgraced. So, I cannot receive you now as my wife. Return to him and do as he commands." With these words Salva sent her back to Bhishma.

She returned to Hastinapura and told Bhishma of what had taken place. The grandsire tried to induce Vichitravirya to marry her, but Vichitravirya roundly refused to marry a maiden whose heart had already been given to another.

Amba then turned to Bhishma and besought him to marry her himself as there was no other recourse.

It was impossible for Bhishma to break his vow, sorry as he was for Amba, and after some vain attempts to make Vichitravirya change his mind, he told her there was no way left to her but to go again to Salva and seek to persuade him. This at first she was too proud to do, and for long years she abode in Hastinapura. Finally, in sheer desperation, she went to Salva and found him adamant in refusal.

The lotus-eyed Amba spent six bitter years in sorrow and baffled hope, and her heart was seared with suffering and all the sweetness in her turned to gall and fierce hatred towards Bhishma as the cause of her blighted life. She sought in vain for a champion among the princes to fight and kill Bhishma and thus avenge her wrongs but even the foremost warriors were afraid of Bhishma and paid no heed to her appeal. At last, she resorted to hard austerities to get the grace of Lord Subrahmanya. He graciously appeared before her and gave her a garland of ever-fresh lotuses, saying that the wearer of that garland would become the enemy of Bhishma.

Amba took the garland and again besought every kshatriya to accept the garland-gift of the six-faced Lord and to champion her cause. But no one had the hardihood to antagonise Bhishma. Finally, she went to King Drupada who also refused to grant her prayer. She then hung the garland at Drupada's palace gate and went away to the forest.

Some ascetics whom she met there and to whom she told her sorrowful tale advised her to go to Parasurama as a suppliant. She followed their advice.

On hearing her sad story, Parasurama was moved with compassion and said: "Dear child, what do you want? I can ask Salva to marry you if you wish it."

Amba said: "No, I do not wish it. I no longer desire marriage or home or happiness. There is now but one thing in life for me—revenge on Bhishma. The only boon I seek is the death of Bhishma."

Parasurama, moved as much by her anguish as by his abiding hatred of the kshatriya race, espoused her cause and fought with Bhishma. It was a long and equal combat between the two greatest men-at-arms of the age, but in the end Parasurama had to acknowledge defeat. He told Amba: "I have done all that I could and I have failed. Throw yourself on the mercy of Bhishma. That is the only course left to you."

Consumed with grief and rage, and kept alive only by the passion for revenge, Amba went to the Himalayas and practised rigorous austerities to get the grace of Siva, now that all human aid had failed her. Siva appeared before her and granted her a boon, that in her next birth she would slay Bhishma.

Amba was impatient for that rebirth which would give her her heart's desire. She made a pyre and plunged into the fire—pouring out the flame in her heart into the scarcely hotter blaze of the pyre.

By the grace of Lord Siva, Amba was born as the daughter of King Drupada. A few years after her birth, she saw the garland of never-fading flowers that still hung at the palace gate and had remained there untouched by anyone through fear. She put it round her neck. Her father Drupada was in consternation at her temerity which he feared would draw on his head the wrath of Bhishma. He sent his daughter in exile out of the capital to the forest. She practised austerities in the forest and in time was transformed into a male and became known as the warrior Sikhandin.

With Sikhandin as his charioteer, Arjuna attacked Bhishma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Bhishma knew that Sikhandin was born as female, and true to his code of chivalry he would not fight him under any circumstance. So it was that Arjuna could fight screened by Sikhandin and conquer Bhishma, especially because Bhishma knew that his long and weary probation on earth was finished and consented to be vanquished. As the arrows struck Bhishma in his last fight, he singled out those which had pierced him deepest and said: "This is Arjuna's arrow and not Sikhandin's." So fell this great warrior.

CHAPTER IV

DEVAYANI AND KACHA

In ancient times, there was a bitter struggle between the devas or gods and the asuras or demons for the lordship of the three worlds. Both belligerents had illustrious preceptors—Brihaspati who was pre-eminent in the knowledge of the Vedas was the guiding spirit of the devas, while the asuras relied on Sukracharya's profound wisdom. The asuras had the formidable advantage that Sukracharya alone possessed the secret of Sanjivini which could recall the dead to life. Thus the asuras who had fallen in the battle were brought back to life, time and again, and continued their fight with the devas. The devas were thus at a great disadvantage in their long-drawn-out war with their natural foes.

They went to Kacha, the son of Brihaspati, and besought his aid. They begged him to win his way into the good graces of Sukracharya and persuade him to take him as a pupil. Once admitted to intimacy and confidence, he was to acquire, by fair means or foul, the secret of Sanjivini and remove the great handicap under which the devas suffered.

Kacha acceded to their request and set out to meet Sukracharya who lived in the capital city of Vrishaparva, the king of the asuras. Kacha went to the house of Sukra, and after due salutation, addressed him thus: "I am Kacha, the grandson of the sage Angiras and the son of Brihaspati. I am a brahmacharin seeking knowledge under your tutelage." It was the law that the wise teacher should not refuse a worthy pupil who sought knowledge of him. So Sukra acceded and said: "Kacha, you belong to a good family. I accept you as my pupil, the more willingly, that by doing so I shall also be showing my respect for Brihaspati."

Kacha spent many years under Sukracharya, rendering to perfection the prescribed duties in the household of his master. Sukracharya had a lovely daughter, Devayani, of whom he was extremely fond. Kacha devoted himself to pleasing and serving her with song and dance and pastime and succeeded in winning her affection, without detriment however to the vows of brahmacharya.

When the asuras came to know of this, they became anxious as they suspected that Kacha's object was somehow to wheedle out of Sukracharya the secret of Sanjivini. They naturally sought to prevent such a calamity.

One day, as Kacha was engaged in grazing the cattle of his master the asuras seized him, tore him to pieces and cast his flesh to the dogs. When the cattle returned without Kacha, Devayani was filled with anxiety, and ran to her father with loud lamentations: "The sun has set," she wailed, "and your nightly fire sacrifice has been performed; still Kacha has not returned home. The cattle have come back by themselves. I fear some mishap has befallen Kacha. I cannot live without him."

The fond father employed the art of Sanjivini and invoked the dead youth to appear. At once Kacha came back to life and greeted the master with smiles. Asked by Devayani the reason for his delay, he told her that as he was grazing the cattle the asuras came suddenly on him and slew him. How he came back to-life he knew not, but come back to life he did, and there he was.

On another occasion Kacha went to the forest to pluck flowers for Devayani, and again the asuras seized and killed him, and pounding his body to a paste, mixed it up in sea-water. As he did not return even after a long time Devayani went as before to her father who brought Kacha back to life by his Sanjivini, and heard from him all that had taken place.

For the third time again, the asuras killed Kacha and very cleverly as they thought, burnt his body, mixed the ashes in wine and served it to Sukracharya who drank it, suspecting nothing. Once more the cows returned home without their keeper, and once again Devayani approached her father with her distressful appeal for Kacha.

Sukracharya tried in vain to console his daughter.

"Though I have again and again brought back Kacha to life," said he, "the asuras seem bent upon killing him. Well, death is the common lot, and it is not proper for a wise soul like you to sorrow at it. Your life is all before you to enjoy, with youth and beauty and the goodwill of the world."

Devayani deeply loved Kacha; and since the world began, wise saws have never cured the ache of bereavement. She said: "Kacha, the grandson of Angiras and the son of Brihaspati, was a blameless boy, who was devoted and tireless in our service. I loved him dearly, and now that he has been killed, life to me has become bleak and insupportable. I shall therefore follow in his path." And Devayani began to fast.

Sukracharya, heart-stricken by his daughter's sorrow, became very angry with the asuras, and felt that the heinous sin of killing a brahmana would weigh heavily on their fortunes. He employed the Sanjivini art and called upon Kacha to appear. By the power of the Sanjivini Kacha dispersed as he was in the wine which was inside Sukracharya's body at the time, regained life, but prevented by the peculiarity of his location from coming out, he could only answer to his name from where he was. Sukracharya exclaimed in angry amazement: "O brahmacharin, how did you get into me? Is this also the work of the asuras? This is really too bad and makes me feel like killing the asuras immediately and joining the devas. But tell me the whole story." Kacha narrated it all, in spite of the inconvenience imposed by his position.

Vaisampayana continued: The high-souled and austere Sukracharya of immeasurable greatness, became angry at the deceit practised on him in his wine, and proclaimed for the benefit of humanity:

'Virtue will desert the man who through lack of wisdom drinks wine. He will be an object of scorn to all. This is my message to humanity, which should be regarded as an imperative scriptural injunction.'

Then he turned to his daughter Devayani and said:

"Dear daughter, here is a problem for you. For Kacha to live, he must rend my stomach and come out of it, and that means death to me. His life can only be bought by my death."

Devayani began to weep and said: "Alas! it is death to me either way—for if either of you perish, I shall not survive."

As Sukracharya sought a way out of the difficulty, the real explanation of it all flashed on him. He said to Kacha: "O son of Brihaspati, I now see with what object you came. . . and verily you have secured it! I must bring you out to life for the sake of

Devayani, but equally for her sake I must not die either. The only way is to initiate you in the art of Sanjivini so that you can bring me back to life after I shall have died when a way is torn out through my entrails for you. You should employ the knowledge I am going to impart to you and revive me, so that Devayani need not grieve for either of us." Accordingly Sukracharya imparted the art of Sanjivini to Kacha. Immediately Kacha came forth from Sukracharya's body, emerging like the full moon from a cloud, while the great preceptor fell down mangled and dead.

But Kacha at once brought Sukracharya back to life by means of his newly acquired Sanjivini. Kacha bowed down to Sukracharya and said: "The teacher who imparts wisdom to the ignorant is a father. Besides, as I have issued from your body you are my mother too."

Kacha remained for many more years under the tutelage of Sukracharya. When the period of his vow ended, he took leave of his master to return to the world of the gods. As he was about to depart Devayani humbly addressed him thus: "O grandchild of Angiras, you have won my heart by your blameless life, your great attainments and nobility of birth. I have loved you long and tenderly, even while you were faithfully following your vows of a brahmacharin. You should now reciprocate my love and make me happy by marrying me. Brihaspati as well as yourself are fully worthy of being honoured by me."

In those days, it was no uncommon thing for wise and learned brahmana ladies to speak out their mind with honourable frankness. But Kacha said:

"O Faultless One, you are my master's daughter and ever worthy of my respect. I got back my life by being born out of your father's body. Hence I am your brother. It is not proper for you, my sister, to ask me to wed you."

Devayani sought in vain to persuade him. "You are the son of Brihaspati," said she, "and not of my father. If I have been the cause of your coming back to life, it was because I loved you—as indeed I have always loved you and wanted you as my husband. It is not fit that you should give up one like me sinless and devoted to you."

Kacha replied: "Do not seek to persuade me to unrighteousness. You are enchanting—more so now than ever, flushed as you are with anger. But I am your brother. Pray bid me adieu. Serve unto perfection, ever and always, my master Sukracharya."

With these words Kacha gently disengaged himself and proceeded to the abode of Indra, the king of gods.

Sukracharya consoled his daughter.

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIAGE OF DEVAYANI

ONE warm afternoon, pleasantly tired with sporting in the woods Devayani and the daughters of Vrishaparva, king of the asuras, went to bathe in the cool waters of a sylvan pool, depositing their garlands on the bank before they entered its waters. A strong breeze blew their clothes together into a huddled heap—and when they came to take them up again, some mistakes naturally occurred. It so happened that princess Sarmishtha, the daughter of the king, clad herself in Devayani's clothes. The latter was vexed and exclaimed half in jest at the impropriety of the daughter of a disciple wearing the clothes of the master's daughter.

These words were spoken half in jest, but the princess Sarmishtha became very angry and said arrogantly: "Do you not know that your father humbly bows in reverence to my royal father every day? Are you not the daughter of a beggar who lives on my father's bounty? You forget I am of the royal race which proudly gives—while you come of a race which begs and receives—and you dare to speak thus to me." Sarmishtha went on, getting angrier and angrier as she spoke till, working herself up into a fit of anger, she finally slapped Devayani on the cheek and pushed her into a dry well. The asura maidens thought that Devayani had lost her life and returned to the palace.

Devayani had not been killed by the fall into the well but was in a sad plight because she could not climb up the steep sides. Emperor Yayati of the Bharata race who was hunting in the forest by a happy chance came to this spot in search of water to slake his thirst. When he glanced into the well, he saw something bright, and looking closer, he was surprised to find a beautiful maiden lying in the well.

He asked: "Who are you, O beautiful maiden with bright ear-rings and ruddy nails? Who is your father? What is your ancestry? How did you fall into the well?"

She replied: "I am the daughter of Sukracharya. He does not know that I have fallen into the well. Lift me up" and she held forth her hands. Yayati seized her hand and helped her out of the well.

Devayani did not wish to return to the capital of the king of the asuras. She did not feel it safe to go there, as she pondered again and again on Sarmishtha's conduct. She told Yayati: "You have held a maiden by her right hand, and you must marry her. I feel that you are in every way worthy to be my husband."

Yayati replied: "Loving soul, I am a kshatriya and you are a brahmana maiden. How can I marry you? How can the daughter of Sukracharya, who is worthy to be the preceptor of the whole world, submit to be the wife of a kshatriya like myself? Revered lady, return home." Having said these words Yayati went back to his capital.

A kshatriya maiden could marry a brahmana according to the ancient tradition, but it was considered wrong for a brahmana maiden to marry a kshatriya. The important thing was to keep the racial status of women unlowered. Hence *anuloma* or the practice of marrying men of higher castes was legitimate and the reverse practice, known as *pratiloma,* i.e. marrying men of a lower caste, was prohibited by the sastras.

Devayani had no mind to return home. She remained sunk in sorrow in the shade of a tree in forest.

Sukracharya loved Devayani more than his life. After waiting long in vain for the return of his daughter who had gone to play with her companions, he sent a woman in search of her. The messenger after a weary search came on her at last near the tree where she was sitting in dejection, her eyes red with anger and grief. And she asked her what had happened.

Devayani said: "Friend, go at once and tell my father that I will not set my foot in the capital of Vrishaparva" and she sent her back to Sukracharya.

Extremely grieved at the sad plight of his daughter Sukracharya hurried to her.

Caressing her, he said: "It is by their own actions, good or bad, that men are happy or miserable. The virtues or vices of others will not affect us in the least." With these words of wisdom, he tried to console her.

She replied in sorrow and anger: "Father, leave alone my merits and faults, which are after all my own concern.

But tell me this—was Sarmishtha, the daughter of Vrishaparva, right when she told me you were but a minstrel singing the praises of kings? She called me the daughter of a mendicant living on the doles won by flattery. Not content with this arrogant contumely, she slapped me and threw me into a pit which was by. I cannot stay in any place within her father's territory." And Devayani began to weep.

Sukracharya drew himself up proudly: "Devayani," he said with dignity, "you are *not* the daughter of a court minstrel. Your father does *not* live on the wages of flattery. You are the daughter of one who is reverenced by all the world. Indra, the king of the gods, knows this, and Vrishaparva is not ignorant of his debt to me. But no worthy man extols his own merits, and I shall say no more about myself. Arise, you are a peerless gem among women, bringing prosperity to your family. Be patient. Let us go home."

In this context Bhagavan Vyasa advises humanity in general in the following words of counsel addressed by Sukracharya to his daughter:

"He conquers the world, who patiently puts up with the abuse of his neighbours. He who controls his anger, as a horseman breaks an unruly horse, is indeed a charioteer and not he who merely holds the reins, but lets the horse go whither it would. He who sheds his anger just as a snake its slough, is a real hero. He who is not moved despite the greatest torments inflicted by others, will realise his aim. He who never gets angry is superior to the ritualist who faithfully performs for a hundred years the sacrifices ordained by scripture. Servants, friends, brothers, wife, children, virtue and truth abandon the man who gives way to anger. The wise will not take to heart the words of boys and girls."

Devayani humbly told her father: "I am indeed a little girl, but, I hope, not too young to benefit by the great truth taught by you. Yet, it is not proper to live with persons who have no sense of decency or decorum. The wise will not keep company with those who speak ill of their family. However rich they may be, the ill-mannered are really the veritable chandalas outside the pale of caste. The virtuous should not mix with them. My mind is ablaze with the anger roused by the taunts of Vrishaparva's daughter. The wounds inflicted by weapons may close in time; scalds may heal gradually; but wounds inflicted by words remain painful as long as one lives."

Sukracharya went to Vrishaparva and fixing his eyes on him gravely said:

"O king, though one's sins may not bring immediate punishment they are sure, sooner or later, to destroy the very germ of prosperity. Kacha, the son of Brihaspati, was a brahmacharin who had conquered his senses and never committed any sin. He served me with fidelity and never strayed from the path of virtue. Your attendants tried to kill him. I bore it. My daughter, who holds her honour high, had to hear dishonouring words uttered by your daughter. Besides, she was pushed into a well by your daughter. She cannot any more stay in your kingdom. Without her I cannot live here either. So, I am going out of your kingdom."

At these words the king of the asuras was sorely troubled and said: "I am ignorant of the charges laid at my door. If you abandon me, I shall enter fire and die."

Sukracharya replied: "I care more for the happiness of my daughter than for the fate of you and your asuras, for she is the one thing I have and dearer to me than life itself. If you can appease her, it is well and good. Otherwise I go."

Vrishaparva and his retinue went to the tree under which Devayani stood and they threw themselves at her feet in supplication.

Devayani was stubborn and said: "Sarmishtha who told me that I was the daughter of a beggar, should become my handmaiden and attend on me in the house into which my father gives me in marriage."

Vrishaparva consented and asked his attendants to fetch his daughter Sarmishtha.

Sarmishtha admitted her fault and bowed in submission. She said: "Let it be as my companion Devayani desires. My father shall not lose his preceptor for a fault committed by me. I will be her attendant." Devayani was pacified and returned to her house with her father.

On another occasion also Devayani came across Yayati. She repeated her request that he should take her as his wife since he had clasped her right hand. Yayati again repeated his objection that he, a kshatriya, could not lawfully marry a brahmana. Finally they both went to Sukracharya and got his assent to their marriage. This is an instance of the *pratiloma* marriage which was resorted to on exceptional occasions. The sastras, no doubt, prescribe what is right and forbid what is wrong but a marriage once effected cannot be made invalid.

Yayati and Devayani spent many days in happiness. Sarmishtha remained with her as an attendant. One day Sarmishtha met Yayati in secret and earnestly prayed to be taken also as his wife. He yielded to her prayer and married her without the knowledge of Devayani.

But Devayani came to know of it and was naturally very angry. She complained to her father and Sukracharya in his rage cursed Yayati with premature old age.

Yayati, thus suddenly stricken with age in the very prime of his manhood, begged so humbly for forgiveness that Sukracharya, who had not forgotten Devayani's rescue from the well, at last relented.

He said: "O king, you have lost the glory which is youth. The curse cannot be recalled, but if you can persuade anyone to exchange his youth for your age the exchange will take effect." Thus he blessed Yayati and bade him farewell.

CHAPTER VI

YAYATI

EMPEROR Yayati was one of the ancestors of the Pandavas. He had never known defeat. He followed the dictates of the sastras, adored the gods and venerated his ancestors with intense devotion. He became famous as a ruler devoted to the welfare of his subjects.

But as has already been told, he became prematurely old by the curse of Sukracharya for having wronged his wife Devayani. In the words of the poet of the Mahabharata: "Yayati attained that old age which destroys beauty and brings on miseries." It is needless to describe the misery of youth suddenly blighted into age, where the horrors of loss are accentuated by pangs of recollection.

Yayati, who found himself suddenly an old man, was still haunted by the desire for sensual enjoyment. He had five beautiful sons, all virtuous and accomplished. Yayati called them and appealed piteously to their affection: "The curse of your grandfather Sukracharya has made me unexpectedly and prematurely old. I have not had my fill of the joys of life; for, not knowing what was in store for me. I lived a life of restraint, denying myself even lawful pleasures. One of you ought to bear the burden of my old age and give his youth in return. He who agrees to this and bestows his youth on me will be the ruler of my kingdom. I desire to enjoy life in the full vigour of youth."

He first asked his eldest son. That son replied: "O great king, women and servants will mock at me if I were to take upon myself your old age. I cannot do so. Ask of my younger brothers who are dearer to you than myself."

When the second son was approached, he gently refused with the words: "Father, you ask me to take up old age which destroys not only strength and beauty but also—as I see—wisdom. I am not strong enough to do so."

The third son replied: "An old man cannot ride a horse or an elephant. His speech will falter. What can I do in such a helpless plight? I cannot agree."

The king was angry and disappointed that his three sons had declined to do as he wished, but he hoped for better from his fourth son, to whom he said: "You should take up my old age. If you exchange your youth with me, I shall give it back to you after some time and take back the old age with which I have been cursed."

The fourth son begged to be forgiven as this was a thing he could by no means consent to. An old man had to seek the help of others even to keep his body clean, a most pitiful plight. No, much as he loved his father he could not do it.

Yayati was struck with sorrow at the refusal of the four sons. Still, hoping against hope, he supplicated his last son who had never yet opposed his wishes: "You must save me. I am afflicted with this old age with its wrinkles, debility and grey hairs as a result of the curse of Sukracharya. It is too hard a trial! If you will take upon yourself these infirmities, I shall enjoy life for just a while more and then give you back your youth and resume my old age and all its sorrows. Pray, do not refuse as your elder brothers have done." Puru, the youngest son, moved by filial love, said: "Father, I gladly give you my youth and relieve you of the sorrows of old age and cares of State. Be happy." Hearing these words Yayati embraced him.

As soon as he touched his son, Yayati became a youth. Puru, who accepted the old age of his father, ruled the kingdom and acquired great renown.

Yayati enjoyed life for long, and not satisfied, went later to the garden of Kubera and spent many years with an apsara maiden. After long years spent in vain efforts to quench desire by indulgence, the truth dawned on him. Returning to Puru, he said:

"Dear son, sensual desire is never quenched by indulgence any more than fire is by pouring ghee in it. I had heard and read this, but till now I had not realised it. No object of desire —corn, gold, cattle or women—nothing can ever satisfy the desire of man. We can reach peace only by a mental poise beyond likes and dislikes. Such is the state of Brahman. Take back your youth and rule the kingdom wisely and well."

With these words Yayati took his old age. Puru, who regained his youth, was made king by Yayati who retired to the forest. He spent his time there in austerities and, in due course, attained heaven.

CHAPTER VII

VIDURA

THE sage Mandavya who had acquired strength of mind and knowledge of the scriptures, spent his days in penance and the practice of truth. He lived in a hermitage in the forests on the outskirts of the city. One day while he was immersed in silent contemplation under the shade of a tree outside his hut of leaves, a band of robbers fled through the woods with officers of the king in hot pursuit. The fugitives entered the ashrama thinking that it would be a convenient place to hide themselves in. They placed their booty in a corner and hid themselves. The soldiers of the king came to the ashrama tracking their footsteps.

The commander of the soldiers asked Mandavya, who was rapt in deep meditation, in a tone of peremptory command: "Did you see the robbers pass by? Where did they go? Reply at once so that we may give chase and capture them." The sage, who was absorbed in yoga, remained silent. The commander repeated the question insolently.

But the sage did not hear anything. In the meantime some of the attendants entered the ashrama and discovered the stolen goods lying there. They reported this to their commander. All of them went in and found the stolen goods and the robbers who were in hiding.

The commander thought: "Now I know the reason why the brahmana pretended to be a silent sage. He is indeed the chief of these robbers. He has inspired this robbery." Then he ordered his soldiers to guard the place, went to the king and told him that the sage Mandavya had been caught with the stolen goods.

The king was very angry at the audacity of the chief of the robbers who had put on the garb of a brahmana sage, the better to deceive the world. Without pausing to verify the facts, he ordered the wicked criminal, as he thought him, to be impaled.

The commander returned to the hermitage, impaled Mandavya on a spear and handed over the stolen things to the king.

The virtuous sage, though impaled on the spear, did not die. Since he was in yoga when he was impaled he remained alive by the power of yoga. Sages who lived in other parts of the forest came to his hermitage and asked Mandavya how he came to be in that terrible pass.

Mandavya replied: "Whom shall I blame? The servants of the king, who protect the world, have inflicted this punishment."

The king was surprised and frightened when he heard that the impaled sage was still alive and that he was surrounded by the other sages of the forest. He hastened to the forest with his attendants and at once ordered the sage to be taken down from the spear. Then he prostrated at his feet and prayed humbly to be forgiven for the offence unwittingly committed

Mandavya was not angry with the king. He went straight to Dharma, the divine dispenser of justice, who was seated on his throne, and asked him: "What crime have I committed to deserve this torture?"

Lord Dharma, who knew the great power of the sage, replied in all humility: "O sage, you have tortured birds and bees. Are you not aware that all deeds, good or bad, however small, inevitably produce their results, good or evil?"

Mandavya was surprised at this reply of Lord Dharma and asked: "When did I commit this offence?"

Lord Dharma replied: "When you were a child."

Mandavya then pronounced a curse on Dharma: "This punishment you have decreed is far in excess of the deserts of a mistake committed by a child in ignorance. Be born, therefore, as a mortal in the world."

Lord Dharma who was thus cursed by the sage Mandavya incarnated as Vidura and was born of the servant-maid of Ambalika, the wife of Vichitravirya.

This story is intended to show that Vidura was the incarnation of Dharma. The great men of the world regarded Vidura as a mahatma who was unparalleled in his knowledge of dharma, sastras and statesmanship and was totally devoid of attachment and anger. Bhishma appointed him, while he was still in his teens, as the chief counsellor of king Dhritarashtra.

Vyasa has it that no one in the three worlds could equal Vidura in virtue and knowledge. When Dhritarashtra gave his permission for the game of dice, Vidura fell at his feet and protested solemnly: "O king and lord, I cannot approve of this action. Strife will set in among your sons as a result. Pray, do not allow this."

Dhritarashtra also tried in many ways to dissuade his wicked son. He said to him: "Do not proceed with this game. Vidura does not approve of it—the wise Vidura of lofty intellect who is ever intent on our welfare. He says the game is bound to result in a fierceness of hate which will consume us and our kingdom." But Duryodhana did not heed this advice. Carried away by his doting fondness for his son, Dhritarashtra surrendered his better judgment and sent to Yudhishthira the fateful invitation to the game.

CHAPTER VIII

KUNTI DEVI

SURA, the grandfather of Sri Krishna, was a worthy scion of the Yadava race. His daughter Pritha was noted for her beauty and virtues. Since his cousin Kuntibhoja was childless, Sura gave his daughter Pritha in adoption to him. From that time she was known by the name of Kunti after her adoptive father.

When Kunti was a little girl, the sage Durvasa stayed for a time as a guest in her father's house and she served the sage for a year with all care, patience and devotion. He was so pleased with her that he gave her a divine mantra. He said: "If you call upon any god repeating this mantra, he will manifest himself to you and bless you with a son equal to him in glory." He granted her this boon because he foresaw by his yogic power the misfortune which was in store for her future husband.*

The impatient curiosity of youth made Kunti test then and there the efficacy of the mantra by repeating it and invoking the Sun whom she saw shining in the heavens. At once the sky grew dark with clouds, and under cover of them the Sun god approached the beautiful princess Kunti and stood gazing at her with ardent, soul-scorching admiration. Kunti, overpowered by the glorious vision of her divine visitor, asked: "O god, who art thou?"

The Sun replied: "Dear maiden, I am the Sun. I have been drawn to you by the spell of the son-giving mantra that you have uttered."

Kunti was aghast and said: "I am an unwedded girl dependent on my father. I am not fit for motherhood and do not desire it. I merely wished to test the power of the boon granted by the sage Durvasa. Go back and forgive this childish folly of mine." But the Sun god could not thus return because the power of the mantra held him. She for her part was mortally afraid of being blamed by the world. The Sun god however reassured her:

"No blame shall attach to you. After bearing my son, you will regain virginity."

Kunti conceived by the grace of the Sun, the giver of light and life to all the world. Divine births take place immediately without the nine months' weary course of mortal gestation. She gave birth to Karna who was born with divine armour and earrings and was bright and beautiful like the Sun. In time, he became one of the world's greatest heroes. After the birth of the child, Kunti once again became a virgin as a result of the boon granted by the Sun.

She wondered what she should do with the child. To hide her fault she placed the child in a sealed box and set it afloat in a river. A childless charioteer happened to see the floating case, and taking it, was surprised and delighted to see within it a gorgeously beautiful child. He handed it over to his wife who lavished a mother's love on it. Thus Karna, the son of the Sun god, came to be brought up as a charioteer's child.

When the time came for giving Kunti in marriage, Kuntibhoja invited all the neighbouring princes and held a swayamvara for her to choose her husband. Many eager suitors flocked to the swayamvara as the princess was widely famed for her great beauty and virtue. Kunti placed the garland on the neck of King Pandu, the bright representative of the Bharata race, whose personality eclipsed the lustre of all the other princes assembled there. The marriage was duly solemnised and she accompanied her husband to his capital Hastinapur.

---

*A sage cursed Pandu to the effect that he would have no children. This will be narrated in the next chapter.

On the advice of Bhishma and in accordance with the prevailing custom, Pandu took a second wife Madri, the sister of the king of Madra. In the old days the kings took two or three wives for making sure of progeny and not for mere sensual desire.

CHAPTER IX

DEATH OF PANDU

ONE day King Pandu was out hunting. A sage and his wife were also sporting in the forest in the guise of deer. Pandu shot the male with an arrow, all ignorant of the fact that it was a sage in disguise. Stricken to death the rishi thus cursed Pandu: "Sinner, you will meet with death the moment you taste the pleasures of the bed." Pandu was heartbroken at this curse and retreated to the forest with his wives after entrusting his kingdom to Bhishma and Vidura, and lived there a life of perfect abstinence. Seeing that Pandu was desirous of off-spring, which the rishi's curse had denied him, Kunti confided to him the story of the mantra she had received from Durvasa.

He urged Kunti and Madri to use the mantra and thus it was that the five Pandavas were born of the gods to Kunti and Madri. They were born and brought up in the forest among ascetics. King Pandu lived for many years in the forest with his wives and children.

It was spring time. And one day Pandu and Madri forgot their sorrows in the rapture of sympathy with the throbbing life around them, the happy flowers, creepers, birds and other creatures of the forest. In spite of Madri's earnest and repeated protests Pandu's resolution broke down under the exhilarating influence of the season, and at once the curse of the sage took effect, and Pandu fell dead.

Madri could not contain her sorrow. Since she felt that she was responsible for the death of the king, she burnt herself on the pyre of her husband entreating Kurti to remain and be a mother to her doubly orphaned children.

The sages of the forest took the bereaved and grief-stricken Kunti and the Pandavas to Hastinapura and entrusted them to Bhishma. Yudhishthira was but sixteen years old at that time.

When the sages came to Hastinapura and reported the death of Pandu in the forest, the whole kingdom was plunged in sorrow. Vidura, Bhishma, Vyasa, Dhritarashtra and others performed the funeral rites. All the people in the kingdom lamented as at a personal loss.

Vyasa said to Satyavati, the grandmother: "The past has gone by pleasantly, but the future has many sorrows in store. The world has passed its youth like a happy dream and it is now entering on disillusionment, sin, sorrow and suffering. Time is inexorable. You need not wait to see the miseries and misfortunes which will befall this race. It will be good for you to leave the city and spend the rest of your days in a hermitage in the forest." Satyavati agreed and went to the forest with Ambika and Ambalika. These three aged queens passed through holy asceticism to the higher regions of bliss and spared themselves the sorrows of their children.

CHAPTER X

BHIMA

THE five sons of Pandu and the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra grew up in mirth and merriment at Hastinapura. Bhima excelled them all in physical prowess. He used to bully Duryodhana and the other Kauravas by dragging them by the hair and beating them. A great swimmer, he would dive into pools, with one or more of them clasped helpless in his arms, and remain under water till they were almost drowned. Whenever they climbed up on a tree he would stand on the ground and kick at the tree and shake them down like ripe fruits. The bodies of the sons of Dhritarashtra would be ever sore with bruises as a result of Bhima's practical jokes. Small wonder that the sons of Dhritarashtra nursed a deep hatred for Bhima from their very infancy.

As the princes grew up, Kripacharya taught them archery and the practice of arms and other things that princes should learn. Duryodhana's jealousy towards Bhima warped his mind and made him commit many improper acts.

Duryodhana was very much worried. His father being blind, the kingdom was ruled by Pandu. After his death Yudhishthira, the heir-apparent, would in course of time become king. Duryodhana thought that as his blind father was quite helpless he must, to prevent Yudhishthira's accession to the throne, contrive a way of killing Bhima. He made arrangements to carry out his resolve since he thought that the powers of the Pandavas would decline with the death of Bhima.

Duryodhana and his brothers planned to throw Bhima into the Ganges, imprison Arjuna and Yudhishthira and then seize the kingdom and rule it. So Duryodhana went with his brothers and the Pandavas for a swim in the Ganges. After the sports they slept in their tents being exhausted. Bhima had exerted himself more than the others and as his food had been poisoned, he felt drowsy and lay down on the bank of the river. Duryodhana bound him with wild creepers and threw him into the river. The evil Duryodhana had already caused sharp spikes to be planted on the spot. This was done purposely so that Bhima might in falling be impaled on the spikes, and lose his life. Fortunately there was no spike in the place where Bhima fell. Poisonous water-snakes bit his body. The poisonous food he had taken was counteracted by the snake poison and Bhima came to no harm, and presently, the river washed him to a bank.

Duryodhana thought that Bhima must have died as he had been thrown in the river infested with poisonous snakes and fanged with spikes. So he returned to the city with the rest of the party in great joy.

When Yudhishthira enquired about the whereabouts of Bhima, Duryodhana informed him that he had preceded them to the city. Yudhishthira believed Duryodhana and as soon as he returned home, asked his mother whether Bhima had returned home. His anxious question brought forth the reply that Bhima had not yet returned, which made Yudhishthira suspect some foul play against his brother, and he went again with his brothers to the forest and searched everywhere. But Bhima could not be found. They went back in great sorrow.

Some time later Bhima awoke and trudged wearily back home. Kunti and Yudhishthira welcomed him and embraced him in great joy. By the poison that had entered his system Bhima became stronger than before.

Kunti sent for Vidura and told him in secret:

"Duryodhana is wicked and cruel. He seeks to kill Bhima since he wants to rule the kingdom. I am worried."

Vidura replied: "What you say is true, but keep your thoughts to yourself, for if the wicked Duryodhana is accused or blamed, his anger and hatred will only increase. Your sons are blessed with long life. You need have no fear on that account."

Yudhishthira also warned Bhima and said: "Be silent over the matter. Hereafter, we have to be careful and help one another and protect ourselves."

Duryodhana was surprised to see Bhima come back alive. His jealousy and hatred increased. He heaved a deep sigh and pined away in sorrow.

CHAPTER XI

KARNA

THE Pandavas and the Kauravas learnt the practice of arms first from Kripacharya and later from Drona. A day was fixed for a test and exhibition of their proficiency in the use of arms in the presence of the Royal family and as the public had also been invited to witness the performance of their beloved princes, there was a large and enthusiastic crowd. Arjuna displayed superhuman skill with his weapons and the vast assemblage was lost in wonder and admiration. Duryodhana's brow was dark with envy and hate.

At the close of the day, there came suddenly from the entrance of the arena a sound, loud and compelling like thunder —the sound made by the slapping of mighty arms in challenge. All eyes turned in that direction. They saw enter through the crowd, which made way in awed silence, a godlike youth from whom light and power seemed to emanate. He looked proudly round him, cast a negligent salute to Drona and Kripa, and strode up to Arjuna. The brothers, all unaware, by the bitter irony of fate, of their common blood, faced one another; for it was Karna.

Karna addressed Arjuna in a voice deep as rumbling thunder: "Arjuna, I shall show greater skill than you have displayed."

With Drona's leave, Karna—the lover of battle—then and there duplicated all Arjuna's feats with careless ease. Great was Duryodhana's exultation. He threw his arms round Karna:

"Welcome, O thou with mighty arms, whom good fortune has sent to us. I and this kingdom of the Kurus are at your command."

Said Karna:

"I, Karna, am grateful, O king. Only two things I seek —your love and single combat with Partha."

Duryodhana clasped Karna again to his bosom:

"My prosperity is all thine to enjoy."

As love flooded Duryodhana's heart, even so did blazing wrath fill Arjuna, who felt affronted; and glaring fiercely at Karna who stood, stately as a mountain peak, receiving the greetings of the Kaurava brothers, he said:

"O Karna, slain by me thou shalt presently go to the hell appointed for those who intrude uninvited and prate unbidden."

Karna laughed in scorn:

"This arena is open to all, O Arjuna, and not to you alone. Might is the sanction of sovereignty and the law is based on it. But what is the use of mere talk which is the weapon of the weak? Shoot arrows instead of words."

Thus challenged, Arjuna, with Drona's permission, hastily embraced his brothers and stood ready for combat, while Karna, taking leave of the Kuru brothers confronted him weapon in hand.

And, as though the divine parents of the heroes sought to encourage their offspring and witness this fateful battle, Indra, the lord of the thunderclouds, and Bhaskara of the infinite rays, simultaneously appeared in the heavens.

When she saw Karna, Kunti knew him as her first born and fainted away. Vidura instructed the maid-servant to attend upon her and she revived. She stood stupefied with anguish not knowing what to do.

As they were about to join in battle, Kripa, well-versed in the rules of single combat, stepped between them and addressed Karna:

"This prince, who is ready to fight with thee, is the son of Pritha and Pandu and a scion of the Kuru race. Reveal, O mighty armed, thy parentage and the race rendered illustrious by thy birth. It is only after knowing thy lineage that Partha can fight with thee, for high-born princes cannot engage in single combat with unknown adventurers."

When he heard these words, Karna bent down his head like a lotus under the weight of rain water.

Duryodhana stood up and said: "If the combat cannot take place merely because Karna is not a prince—why, that is easily remedied. I crown Karna as the king of Anga." He then obtained the assent of Bhishma and Dhritarashtra, performed all the necessary rites and invested Karna with the sovereignty of the kingdom of Anga giving him the crown, jewels and other royal insignia. At that moment, as the combat between the youthful heroes seemed about to commence, the old charioteer Adhiratha, who was the foster-father of Karna, entered the assembly, staff in hand and quaking with fear.

No sooner did he see him than Karna, the newly crowned king of Anga, bowed his head and did humble obeisance in all filial reverence. The old man called him son, embraced him with his thin and trembling arms, and wept with joy wetting with tears of love his head already moistened by the water of the coronation.

At this sight, Bhima roared with laughter and said: "O. he is after all only the son of a charioteer! Take up the driving whip then as befits thy parentage. Thou art not worthy of death at the hands of Arjuna. Nor shouldst thou reign in Anga as a king."

At this outrageous speech, Karna's lips trembled with anguish and he speechlessly looked up at the setting sun with a deep sigh. But Duryodhana broke in indignantly:

"It is unworthy of you, O Vrikodara, to speak thus. Valour is the hall-mark of a kshatriya—nor is there much sense in tracing great heroes and mighty rivers to their sources. I could give you hundreds of instances of great men of humble birth —and I know awkward questions might be asked of your own origin. Look at this warrior, his godlike form and bearing, his armour and earrings, and his skill with weapons. Surely there is some mystery about him, for how could a tiger be born of an antelope? Unworthy of being king of Anga, didst thou say? I verily hold him worthy to rule the whole world."

In generous wrath, Duryodhana took Karna in his chariot and drove away.

The sun set; the crowd dispersed in tumult. There were groups loud in talk under the light of the lamps, some glorifying Arjuna, others Karna, and others again Duryodhana according to their predilection.

Indra foresaw that a supreme contest was inevitable between his son Arjuna and Karna; and he put on the garb of a brahmana and came to Karna, who was reputed for his charity, and begged of him his earrings and armour. The Sun god had already warned Karna in a dream that Indra would try to deceive him in this manner. Still, Karna could not bring himself to refuse any gift that was asked of him. Hence he cut off the earrings and armour with which he was born and gave them to the brahmana.

Indra, the king of gods, was filled with surprise and joy. After accepting the gift, he praised Karna as having done what no one else would do, and, shamed into generosity, bade Karna ask for any boon he wanted.

Karna replied: "I desire to get your weapon, the Sakti, which has the power to kill enemies." Indra granted the boon, but with a fateful proviso. He said: "You can use this weapon against but one enemy, and it will kill him whosoever he may be. But this killing done, this weapon will no longer be available to you but will return to me." With these words Indra disappeared.

Karna went to Parasurama and became his disciple by representing to him that he was a brahmana. He learnt of Parasurama the mantra for using the master weapon known as Brahmastra. One day Parasurama was reclining with the head on Karna's lap when a stinging worm burrowed into Karna's thigh. Blood began to flow and the pain was terrible, but Karna bore it without tremor lest he should disturb the master's sleep. Parasurama awoke and saw the blood which had poured from the wound. He said: "Dear pupil, you are not a brahmana. A kshatriya alone can remain unmoved under all bodily torments. Tell me the truth."

Karna confessed that he had told a lie in presenting himself as a brahmana and that he was in fact the son of a charioteer. Parasurama in his anger pronounced this curse on him: "Since you deceived your guru, the Brahmastra you have learnt shall fail you at the fated moment. You will be unable to recall the invocatory mantra when your hour comes."

It was because of this curse that at the crisis of his last fight with Arjuna, Karna was not able to recall the Brahmastra spell, though he had remembered it till then. Karna was the faithful friend of Duryodhana and remained loyally with the Kauravas until the end. After the fall of Bhishma and Drona, Karna became the leader of the Kaurava army and fought brilliantly for two days. In the end, the wheel of his chariot stuck in the ground and he was not able to lift it free and drive the chariot along. While he was in this predicament, Arjuna killed him. Kunti was sunk in sorrow, all the more poignant because she had, at that time, to conceal it.

CHAPTER XII

DRONA

DRONA, the son of a brahmana named Bharadwaja, after completing his study of the Vedas and the Vedangas, devoted himself to the art of archery and became a great master. Drupada, the son of the king of Panchala, who was a friend of Bharadwaja, was a fellow-student of Drona in the hermitage and there grew up between them the generous intimacy of youth. Drupada, in his boyish enthusiasm, used often to tell Drona that he would give him half his kingdom when he ascended the throne.

After completing his studies, Drona married the sister of Kripa, and a son Aswatthama was born to them. Drona was passionately attached to his wife and son, and, for their sake, desired to acquire wealth, a thing which he had never cared for before. Learning that Parasurama was distributing his riches among the brahmanas, he first went to him; but he was too late as Parasurama had already given away all his wealth and was about to retire to the forest. But, anxious to do something for Drona, Parasurama offered to teach him the use of weapons, of which he was supreme master.

Drona joyfully agreed, and great archer as he already was, he became unrivalled master of the military art, worthy of eager welcome as preceptor in any princely house in that war-like age.

Meanwhile, Drupada had ascended the throne of Panchala on the death of his father. Remembering their early intimacy and Drupada's expressions of readiness to serve him—even to the extent of sharing his kingdom—Drona went to him in the confident hope of being treated generously. But he found the king very different from the student. When he introduced himself as an old friend, Drupada, far from being glad to see him, felt it an intolerable presumption. Drunk with power and wealth, Drupada said: "O brahmana, how dare you address me familiarly as your friend? What friendship can there be between a throned king and a wandering beggar? What a fool must you be to presume on some long past acquaintance to claim friendship with a king who rules a kingdom? How can a pauper be the friend of a wealthy man, or an ignorant boor of a learned scholar, or a coward of a hero? Friendship can exist only between equals. A vagrant beggar cannot be the friend of a sovereign.” Drona was turned out of the palace with scorn in his ears and a blazing wrath in his heart.

He made a mental vow to punish the arrogant king for this insult and his repudiation of the sacred claims of early friendship. His next move in search of employment was to go to Hastinapura, where he spent a few days, in retirement, in the house of his brother-in-law Kripacharya.

One day, the princes were playing with a ball outside the precincts of the city, and in the course of the game, the ball as well as Yudhishthira's ring fell into a well. The princes all gathered round the well and saw the ring shining from the bottom through the clear water, but could see no way of getting it out. They did not, however, notice that a brahmana of dark complexion stood nearby watching them with a smile.

“Princes,” he surprised them by saying, “you are the descendants of the heroic Bharata race. Why cannot you take out the ball as anyone skilled in arms should know how to do? Shall I do it for you?”

Yudhishthira laughed and said in fun: “O brahmana, if you take out the ball, we will see that you have a good meal in the house of Kripacharya.” Then Drona, the brahmana stranger, took a blade of grass and sent it forth into the well after reciting certain words of power for propelling it as an arrow. The blade of grass straightway sped and stuck into the ball. Afterwards he sent a number of similar blades in succession which clinging together formed a chain, wherewith Drona took out the ball.

The princes were lost in amazement and delight and begged of him to get the ring also. Drona borrowed a bow, fixed an arrow on the string and sent it right into the ring. The arrow rebounding brought up the ring and the brahmana handed it to the prince with a smile.

Seeing these feats, the princes were astonished and said: “We salute you, O brahmana. Who are you? Is there anything we can do for you?” and they bowed to him.

He said: "O princes, go to Bhishma and learn from him who I am."

From the description given by the princes, Bhishma knew that the brahmana was none other than the famous master Drona. He decided that Drona was the fittest person to impart further instruction to the Pandavas and the Kauravas. So, Bhishma received him with special honour and employed him to instruct the princes in the use of arms.

As soon as the Kauravas and the Pandavas had acquired mastery in the science of arms, Drona sent Karna and Duryodhana to seize Drupada and bring him alive, in discharge of the duty they owed to him as their master. They went as ordered by him, but could not accomplish their task. Then the master sent forth Arjuna on the same errand. He defeated Drupada in battle and brought him and his minister captives to Drona.

Then Drona smilingly addressed Drupada: "Great king, do not fear for your life. In our boyhood we were companions but you were pleased to forget it and dishonour me. You told me that a king alone could be friend to a king. Now I am a king, having conquered your kingdom. Still I seek to regain my friendship with you, and so I give you half of your kingdom which has become mine by conquest. Your creed is that friendship is possible only between equals, and we shall now be equals—each owning a half of your kingdom."

Drona thought this sufficient revenge for the insult he had suffered, set Drupada at liberty and treated him with honour.

Drupada's pride was thus humbled but, since hate is never extinguished by retaliation, and few things are harder to bear than the pangs of wounded vanity, hatred of Drona and a wish to be revenged on him became the ruling passion of Drupada's life. The king performed tapas, underwent fasts and conducted sacrifices in order to win the gratified gods to bless him with a son who should slay Drona and a daughter who should wed Arjuna. His efforts were crowned with success with the birth of Dhrishtadyumna who commanded the Pandava army at Kurukshetra and, helped by a strange combination of circumstances, slew the otherwise unconquerable Drona, and birth of Draupadi, the consort of the Pandavas.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAX PALACE

THE jealousy of Duryodhana began to grow at the sight of the physical strength of Bhima and the dexterity of Arjuna. Karna and Sakuni became Duryodhana's evil counsellors in planning wily stratagems. As for poor Dhritarashtra, he was a wise man no doubt and he also loved his brother's sons, but he was weak of will and dotingly attached to his own children. For his children's sake the worse became the better reason, and he would sometimes even knowingly follow the wrong path.

Duryodhana sought in various ways to kill the Pandavas. It was by means of the secret help rendered by Vidura who wanted to save the family from a great sin, that the Pandavas escaped with their lives.

One unforgivable offence of the Pandavas in the eyes of Duryodhana was that the people of the city used to praise them openly and declare in season and out of season that Yudhishthira alone was fit to be the king. They would flock together and argue: "Dhritarashtra could never be king for he was born blind. It is not proper that he should now hold the kingdom in his hands. Bhishma cannot be king either, because he is devoted to truth and to his vow that he would not be a king. Hence Yudhishthira alone should be crowned as king. He alone can rule the Kuru race and the kingdom with justice." Thus people talked everywhere. These words were poison to Duryodhana's ears, and made him writhe and burn with jealousy.

He went to Dhritarashtra and complained bitterly of the public talk: "Father, the citizens babble irrelevant nonsense. They have no respect even for such venerable persons as Bhishma and yourself. They say that Yudhishthira should be immediately crowned king. This would bring disaster on us. You were set aside because of your blindness, and your brother became the king. If Yudhishthira is to succeed his father, where do we come? What chance has our progeny? After Yudhishthira his son, and his son's son, and then *his* son will be the kings. We will sink into poor relations dependent on them even for our food. To live in hell would be better than that!"

At these words, Dhritarashtra began to ponder and said: "Son, what you say is true. Still Yudhishthira will not stray from the path of virtue. He loves all. He has truly inherited all the excellent virtues of his deceased father. People praise him and will support him, and all the ministers of the State and commanders of armies, to whom Pandu had endeared himself by his nobility of character, will surely espouse his cause. As for the people, they idolise the Pandavas. We cannot oppose them with any chance of success. If we do injustice, the citizens will rise in insurrection and either kill us or expel us. We shall only cover ourselves with ignominy."

Duryodhana replied: "Your fears are baseless. Bhishma will at worst be neutral, while Aswatthama is devoted to me, which means that his father Drona and uncle Kripa will also be on our side. Vidura cannot openly oppose us, if for no other reason, because he has not the strength. Send the Pandavas immediately to Varanavata. I tell you the solemn truth that my cup of suffering is full and I can bear no more. It pierces my heart and renders me sleepless and makes my life a torment. After sending the Pandavas to Varanavata we shall try to strengthen our party."

Later, some politicians were prevailed upon to join Duryodhana's party and advise the king in the matter. Kanika, the minister of Sakuni, was their leader. "O king," he said, "guard yourselves against the sons of Pandu, for their goodness and influence are a menace to you and yours. The Pandavas are the sons of your brother, but the nearer the kin, the closer and deadlier the danger. They are very strong."

Sakuni's minister continued: "Be not wroth with me if I say a king should be mighty in action as in name, for nobody will believe in strength which is never displayed. State affairs should be kept secret and the earliest indication to the public, of a wise plan, should be its execution. Also, evils must be eradicated promptly for a thorn which has been allowed to remain in the body may cause a festering wound. Powerful enemies should be destroyed and even a weak foe should not be neglected since a mere spark, if overlooked, may cause a forest fire. A strong enemy should be destroyed by means of stratagem and it would be folly to show mercy to him. O king, guard yourself against the sons of Pandu. They are very powerful."

Duryodhana told Dhritarashtra of his success in securing adherents: "I have bought the goodwill of the king's attendants with gifts of wealth and honour. I have won over his ministers to our cause. If you will adroitly prevail upon the Pandavas to go to Varanavata, the city and the whole kingdom will take our side. They will not have a friend left here. Once the kingdom has become ours, there will be no power for harm left in them, and it may even be possible to let them come back."

When many began to say what he himself wished to believe, Dhritarashtra's mind was shaken and he yielded to his sons' counsels. It only remained to give effect to the plot. The ministers began to praise the beauty of Varanavata in the hearing of the Pandavas and made mention of the fact that a great festival in honour of Siva would be conducted there with all pomp and splendour. The unsuspecting Pandavas were easily persuaded, especially when Dhritarashtra also told them in tones of great affection that they should certainly go and witness the festivities, not only because they were worth seeing but because the people of the place were eager to welcome them. The Pandavas took leave of Bhishma and other elders and went to Varanavata.

Duryodhana was elated. He plotted with Karna and Sakuni to kill Kunti and her sons at Varanavata. They sent for Purochana, minister, and gave him secret instructions which he bound himself to carry out faithfully.

Before the Pandavas proceeded to Varanavata, Purochana, true to his instructions, hastened to the spot well in advance and had a beautiful palace built for their reception. Combustible materials like jute, lac, ghee, oil, and fat were used in the construction of the palace. The materials for the plastering of the walls were also inflammable. He skilfully filled up various parts of the building with dry things which could catch fire easily, and had inviting seats and bedsteads disposed at the most combustible places. Every convenience was furnished for the Pandavas to dwell in the city without fear, until the palace was built. When the Pandavas had settled down in the wax house, the idea was to set fire to it at night when they were sound asleep. The ostentatious love and solicitude with which the Pandavas had been received and treated would obviate all suspicion and the fire would be taken as a sad case of pure accident. No one would dream of blaming the Kauravas.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE OF THE PANDAVAS

AFTER taking reverential leave of the elders and embracing their comrades, the Pandavas proceeded to Varanavata. The citizens accompanied them a part of their way and returned unwillingly to the city. Vidura pointedly warned Yudhishthira in words intelligible only to the prince:

"He alone will escape from danger who forestalls the intentions of an astute enemy. There are weapons sharper than those made of steel, and the wise man who would escape destruction must know the means to guard against them. The conflagration that devastates a forest cannot hurt a rat which shelters itself in a hole or a porcupine which burrows in the earth. The wise man knows his bearings by looking at the stars."

This was meant to indicate to Yudhishthira and to him alone, Duryodhana's hideous plot and the means of escape from danger. Yudhishthira answered that he had grasped Vidura's meaning, and later he communicated it to Kuntidevi. Though they had started on their journey in a sunshine of joy, they now proceeded in a dark cloud of sorrow and anxiety.

The people of Varanavata were very happy to learn of the coming of the Pandavas to their city and welcomed them. After a brief stay in other houses while the palace specially meant for them was being got ready, they moved into it under Purochana's guidance. It was named "Sivam" which means prosperity, and that was the name which, in ghastly irony, was given to the deathtrap. Yudhishthira diligently examined the whole place bearing in mind Vidura's warning and verified that the building was without a shadow of doubt constructed with combustible material. Yudhishthira told Bhima: "Though we know very well that the palace is a trap of death, we should not make Purochana suspect that we know his plot. We should get away at the right moment but escape would be difficult if we gave room for any suspicion."

So they stayed in that house to all appearance free from care. Meanwhile, Vidura had sent an expert miner who met them in secret and said: "My pass-word is the veiled warning Vidura gave you. I have been sent to help you for your protection."

Thenceforward the miner worked for many days in secret, and completed a subterranean egress unknown to Purochana, from the wax house right under and across the walls and the moat which ran round the precincts.

Purochana had his quarters at the gate-way of the palace. The Pandavas kept armed vigil during night, but by day they used to go out hunting in the forest, to all appearance bent on pleasure but really to make themselves familiar with the forest paths. As has already been said, they carefully kept to themselves their knowledge of the wicked plot against their lives. On his side Purochana, anxious to lull all suspicion and make the murderous fire seem an accident, waited fully a year before putting the plot into effect.

At last Purochana felt he had waited long enough; and the watchful Yudhishthira, knowing that the fated moment had arrived, called his brothers together and told them that then or never was the time for them to escape.

Kuntidevi arranged a sumptuous feast for the attendants that day. Her idea was to lull them to well-fed sleep at night.

At midnight, Bhima set fire to the palace in several places. Kuntidevi and the Pandava brothers hurried out through the subterranean passage, groping their way out in the darkness. Presently, there was a roaring fire all over the palace and a fast swelling crowd of frightened citizens all around in loud and helpless lamentation. Some bustled aimlessly in futile efforts to put out the conflagration and all joined in the cry: "Alas! Alas! This surely is Duryodhana's work—and he is killing the sinless Pandavas!" The palace was reduced to ashes. Purochana's residence was enveloped in flames before he could escape and he fell an unpitied victim to his own wicked plot. The people of Varanavata sent the following message to Hastinapura : "The palace which was the abode of the Pandavas has burnt down and no one in it escaped alive."

Vyasa has beautifully described the then mental state of Dhritarashtra : "Just as the water of a deep pool is cool at the bottom and warm on the surface, so the heart of Dhritarashtra was at once warm with joy and chill with sorrow."

Dhritarashtra and his sons cast off their royal garments in token of mourning for the Pandavas whom they believed consumed in the fire; they dressed themselves in single garments as became sorrowful kinsmen and went to the river and performed the propitiatory funeral rites. No outward show of heart-broken bereavement was omitted.

It was noticed by some that Vidura was not so overcome by sorrow as the others and this was set down to his philosophical bent of mind, but the real reason was that he knew that the Pandavas had escaped to safety. When he looked sad, he was in fact following with his mind's eye the weary wanderings of the Pandavas. Seeing that Bhishma was sunk in sorrow, Vidura secretly comforted him by revealing to him the story of their successful escape.

Bhima saw that his mother and brothers were exhausted by their nightly vigils as well as by fear and anxiety. He therefore carried his mother on his shoulders and took Nakula and Sahadeva on his hips, supporting Yudhishthira and Arjuna with his two hands. Thus heavily laden, he strode effortlessly like a lordly elephant forcing his way through the forest and pushing aside the shrubs and trees that obstructed his path. When they reached the Ganges, there was a boat ready for them in charge of a boatman who knew their secret. They crossed the river in the darkness, and entering a mighty forest they went on all night in darkness that wrapped them like a shroud and in a silence broken hideously by the frightful noises of wild animals. At last, quite fordone by toil, they sat down unable to bear the pangs of thirst and overcome by the drowsiness of sheer fatigue. Kuntidevi said: "I do not care even if the sons of Dhritarashtra are here to seize me, but I must stretch my legs." She forthwith laid herself down and was sunk in sleep. Bhima forced his way about the tangled forest in search of water in the darkness, and finding a pool, he wetted his upper garment, made cups of lotus leaves and brought water to his mother and brothers who were perishing with thirst. Then, while the others slept in merciful forgetfulness of their woes, Bhima alone sat awake absorbed in deep thought. "Do not the plants and the creepers of the forest mutually help each other and live in peace?" he reflected; "why should the wicked Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana try to injure us in these ways?" Sinless himself, Bhima could not understand the springs of sinfulness in others and was lost in grief.

The Pandavas marched on, suffering many hardships and overcoming many dangers. Part of the way, they would carry their mother to make better speed; sometimes, tired beyond even heroic endurance, they would pause and rest Sometimes, full of life and the glorious strength of youth, they would race with each other.

They met Bhagavan Vyasa on the way. All of them bowed before him and received encouragement and wise counsel from him. When Kunti told him of the sorrows that had befallen them, Vyasa consoled her with these words : "No virtuous man is strong enough to live in virtue at all times, nor is any sinner bad enough to exist in one welter of sin. Life is a tangled web and there is no one in the world who has not done both good and evil. Each and everyone has to bear the consequence of his actions. Do not give way to sorrow." Then they put on the garb of brahmanas, as advised by Vyasa, went to the city of Ekachakra and stayed there in a brahmana's house, waiting for better days.

CHAPTER XV

THE SLAYING OF BAKASURA

In the city of Ekachakra, the Pandavas stayed in the guise of brahmanas, begging their food in the brahmana streets and bringing what they got to their mother, who would wait anxiously till their return. If they did not come back in time, she would be worried, fearing that some evil might have befallen them.

Kunti would divide the food they brought in two equal portions. One half would go to Bhima; the other half would be shared by the other brothers and the mother. Bhima, being born of the Wind god had great strength and a mighty appetite. Vrikodara, one of the names of Bhima, means wolf-bellied, and a wolf, you know, looks always famished and, however much it might eat, its hunger is never quite satisfied. Bhima's insatiable hunger and the scanty food he used to get at Ekachakra went ill together, and he daily grew thin, which caused much distress to his mother and brothers. Some time later, Bhima became acquainted with a potter for whom he dug and fetched clay. The potter, in return, presented him with a big earthen pot which became an object of merriment to the street urchins.

One day, when the other brothers had gone to beg for alms, Bhimasena stayed behind with his mother, and they heard loud lamentations from the house of their brahmana landlord. Some great calamity surely had befallen the poor family and Kunti went inside to learn what it was. The brahmana and his wife could hardly speak for weeping, but, at last the brahmana said to his wife: "O unfortunate and foolish woman, though time and again I wished we should leave this city for good, you would not agree. You persisted in saying that you were born and bred here and here you would stay where your parents and relations had lived and died. How can I think of losing you who have been to me at once my life's mate, loving mother, the wife who bore my children, nay, my all in all? I cannot send you to death while I keep myself alive. This little girl has been given to us by God as a trust to be handed over in time to a worthy man. It is unrighteous to sacrifice her who is a gift of God to perpetuate the race. It is equally impossible to allow this other, our son, to be killed. How can we live after consigning to death our only solace in life and our hope for the hereafter? If he is lost, who would pour libations for us and our ancestors? Alas! you did not pay heed to my words, and this is the deadly fruit of your perversity. If I give up my life, this girl and boy will surely die soon for want of a protector. What shall I do? It is best that all of us perish together" and the brahmana burst forth sobbing.

The wife replied: "I have been a good wife to you, and done my duty by bearing you a daughter and a son. You are able, and I am not, to bring up and protect your children. Just as castout offal is pounced upon and seized by rapacious birds, a poor widowed woman is an easy prey to wicked and dishonest people. Dogs fight for a cloth wet with ghee, and in pulling it hither and thither in unclean greed, tear it to foul rags. In like manner, a woman without a guardian becomes the sport of wicked people who drag her hither and thither. It is impossible for me to protect two fatherless orphans—and they will perish miserably like fish in a waterless pond. It would be best if I am handed over to the rakshasa. Blessed indeed is the woman who passes to the other world, while her husband is alive. This, as you know, is what the scriptures say. Bid me farewell. Take care of my children. I have been happy with you. I have performed many meritorious actions. By my faithful devotion to you, I am sure of heaven. Death has no terror for one who has been a good wife. After I am gone, take another wife. Gladden me with a brave smile, give me your blessing, and send me to the rakshasa."

Hearing these words of his wife, the brahmana tenderly embraced her and, utterly overcome by her love and courage, he wept like a child. When he could find his voice, he replied: "O beloved and noble one, what words are these? Can I bear to live without you? The first duty of a married man is to protect his wife. I should indeed be a pitiful sinner if I lived after giving you up to the rakshasa, sacrificing both love and duty."

The daughter who was hearing this piteous conversation, now interposed with sobs: "Listen to me, child though I be, and then do what is proper. It is me alone that you can spare to the rakshasa. By sacrificing one soul, that is, myself, you can save the others. Let me be the little boat to take you across this river of calamity. If both of you pass away, both I and this little baby brother of mine will soon perish unprotected in this hard world. If this family of ours can be saved from destruction by my single death, what a good death mine would be! Even if you consider my welfare alone, you should send me to the rakshasa."

At these brave words of the poor child, the parents tenderly embraced her and wept. Seeing them all in tears the boy, hardly more than a baby, started up with glowing eyes, lisping: "Father, do not weep. Mother, do not weep. Sister, do not weep," and he went to each and sat on their lap by turns. Then he rose up, took a stick of firewood and brandishing it about, said in his sweet childish treble: "I shall kill the rakshasa with this stick." The child's action and speech made them smile in the midst of their tears, but only added to their great sorrow. Feeling this was the moment for intervention, Kuntidevi entered and enquired for the cause of their sorrow and whether there was anything she could do to help them.

The brahmana said: "Mother, this is a sorrow far beyond your aid. There is a cave near the city, where lives a cruel and terribly strong rakshasa named Bakasura. He forcibly seized this city and kingdom thirteen years ago, since when he has held us in cruel thraldom. The kshatriya ruler of this country has fled to the city of Vetrakiya and is unable to protect us. This rakshasa formerly used to issue from his cave whenever he liked and, mad with hunger, indiscriminately kill and eat men, women and children in this city. The citizens prayed to the rakshasa to come to some sort of stipulation in place of this promiscuous slaughter. They prayed: 'Do not kill us wantonly at your whim and pleasure. Once a week we shall bring you sufficient meat, rice, curds and intoxicating liquors and many other delicacies. We will deliver these to you in a carriage drawn by two bullocks driven by a human being taken from each house in turn. You can make a repast of the rice, along with the bullocks and the man, but refrain from this mad orgy of slaughter.' The rakshasa agreed to the proposal. From that day, this strong rakshasa has been protecting this kingdom from foreign raids and wild beasts. This arrangement has been in force for many years.

"No hero has been found to free this country from this pest, for the rakshasa has invariably defeated and killed all the brave men who tried. Mother, our legitimate sovereign is unable to protect us. The citizens of a country, whose king is weak, should not marry and beget children. A worthy family life, with culture and domestic happiness, is possible only under the rule of a good, strong king. Wife, wealth and other things are not safe, if there be no proper king ruling over us, and having long suffered with the sight of others' sorrow, our own turn has come now to send a person as prey to the rakshasa. I have not the means to purchase a substitute. None of us can bear to live after sending one of us to a cruel death, and so I shall go with my whole family to him. Let the wicked glutton gorge himself with all of us. I have pained you with these things, but you wished to know. Only God can help us, but we have lost all hope even of that."

The political truths contained in this story of Ekachakra are noteworthy and suggestive.

Kunti talked the matter over with Bhimasena and returned to the brahmana. She said: "Good man, do not despair. God is great. I have five sons. One of them will take the food to the rakshasa."

The brahmana jumped up in amazed surprise, but then shook his head sadly and would not hear of the substituted sacrifice. Kunti said: "O brahmana, do not be afraid. My son is endowed with superhuman powers derived from mantras and will certainly kill this rakshasa, as I have myself seen him kill many other such rakshasas. But keep this a secret, for, if you reveal it, his power will come to naught."

Kunti's fear was that, if the story got noised abroad, Duryodhana's men would see the hand of the Pandavas, and find out their whereabouts.

Bhima was filled with unbounded joy and enthusiasm at the arrangement made by Kunti. The other brothers returned to the house with alms. Dharmaputra saw the face of Bhimasena radiant with joy to which it had long been a stranger and inferred that he was resolved on some hazardous adventure and questioned Kunti who told him everything.

Yudhishthira said: "What is this? Is not this rash and thoughtless? Relying on Bhima's strength we sleep without care or fear. Is it not through Bhima's strength and daring that we hope to regain the kingdom that has been seized by our deceitful enemies? Was it not through the prowess of Bhima that we escaped from the wax palace? And you are risking the life of Bhima who is our present protection and future hope. I fear your many trials have clouded your judgment!"

Kuntidevi replied: "Dear sons, we have lived happily for many years in the house of this brahmana. Duty, nay, man's highest virtue, is to repay the benefit he has enjoyed by doing good in his turn. I know the heroism of Bhima and have no fears; remember who carried us from Varanavata and who killed the demon Hidimba. It is our duty to be of service to this brahmana family."

Then the citizens came to the brahmana's house with many kinds of meat, delicacies, jugs of curds and intoxicating liquors, placed in a carriage drawn by two bullocks. Bhima got into the carriage and set out to the cave of the rakshasa.

The carriage went forth to the accompaniment of music. When they reached the accustomed place, the citizens turned back to safety, leaving Bhima to go on alone in the carriage. The place in front of the rakshasa's den was noisome with bones, hair and gore and swarmed with vermin and ants. Bhima saw that it was littered over with torn off and mutilated hands, legs and heads and that foul carrion birds circled overhead sensing food. Bhima stopped the carriage and began voraciously to devour the food which had been meant for the rakshasa, saying to himself: "I must eat the food before it gets thrown in the confusion of my fight with the rakshasa. Moreover, after I slay him, I shall be polluted by contact with this corpse and cannot eat the food."

The rakshasa, whose temper had already been chafed by long waiting, was maddened when he decried what Bhima was doing. Bhima also saw the rakshasa and challenged him to fight. The rakshasa with his enormous body, red moustache, beard and hair, and a mouth stretching from ear to ear, ran forth towards Bhima who merely smiled unconcerned and, evading the clutching hands continued to eat with his back to the rakshasa. The rakshasa rained blows with his fists on the back turned so arrogantly to him, but Bhima neither noticed him nor stopped eating. The rakshasa uprooted a tree and threw it at Bhima who still did not even then turn to him but merely brushed aside the missile with his left hand and continued to eat with his right. It was only after he had finished, even to the last pot of curds, and rinsed his mouth, that he rose up with a sigh of satisfaction and faced the rakshasa.

A great fight ensued between them. Bhima played with the rakshasa, throwing him down at will and bidding him rise and fight again. Thus, the rakshasa was many a time tossed up by Bhima as though he were a mere doll of rags. Finally, Bhima threw him down, placed his knee on his back and broke his bones. The rakshasa uttered a frightful howl of pain and despair spewing blood and died. Bhima dragged the carcass to the gates of the city. Returning to the brahmana's house, he took a bath and then gave an account of the day's deed, to the great delight of his mother.

CHAPTER XVI

DRAUPADI'S SWAYAMVARA

WHILE the Pandavas were living in disguise as brahmanas at Ekachakrapura, news of the swayamvara of Draupadi, the daughter of Drupada, King of Panchala, reached them. Many brahmanas of Ekachakrapura planned to go to Panchala in the hope of receiving the customary gifts and to see the festivities and pageant of a royal wedding. Kunti, with her motherly instinct, read her sons' desire to go to Panchala and win Draupadi. So she told Yudhishthira: "We have been in this city so long that it is time to think of going somewhere else. We have seen these hills and dales till we are tired of them. The alms doled out to us are diminishing and it is not good to outstay your entertainment. Let us therefore go to Drupada's kingdom which is reputed to be fair and prosperous." Kunti was second to none in worldly wisdom and sagacity and could gracefully divine her sons' thoughts and spare them the awkwardness of expressing them.

The brahmanas went in groups to witness the swayamvara and the Pandavas mingled with them in the guise of brahmanas. After a long march the party reached the beautiful city of Drupada and billeted themselves in the house of a potter as obscure brahmanas of no note.

Though Drupada and Drona were outwardly at peace, the former never could forget or forgive the humiliation he had suffered at the latter's hands. Drupada's one wish was to give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna. Drona loved Arjuna so dearly that he could hardly look upon his pupil's father-in-law as his deadly foe, and if there were a war, Drupada would be all the stronger for being Arjuna's father-in-law. When he heard the news of the destruction of the Pandavas at Varanavata, he was plunged in sorrow but was relieved by a later rumour that they had escaped.

The marriage hall was beautifully decorated and built amidst a finely laid-out group of new guest-houses designed to accommodate the swayamvara suitors and guests. Attractive sights and sports had been arranged for public entertainment and there were glorious festivities for fourteen days continuously.

A mighty steel bow was placed in the marriage hall. The candidate for the princess' hand was required to string the bow and with it shoot a steel arrow through the central aperture of a revolving disk at a target placed on high. This required almost superhuman strength and skill, and Drupada proclaimed that the hero who would win his daughter should perform this feat.

Many valiant princes had gathered there from all parts of Bharatavarsha. The sons of Dhritarashtra were there as well as Karna, Krishna, Sisupala, Jarasandha and Salya. Besides the competitors there was a huge concourse of spectators and visitors. The noise that issued therefrom resembled the uproar of the ocean and over it all arose the auspicious sound of festal music from hundreds of instruments. Dhrishtadyumna on horseback rode in front of his sister Draupadi seated on an elephant. Fresh from her auspicious bridal bath, and clad in flowing silk Draupadi dismounted and entered the swayamvara hall, seeming to fill it with the sweetness of her presence and perfect beauty. Garland in hand, and coyly glancing at the valiant princes, who for their part looked at her in speechless admiration, she ascended the dais. The brahmanas repeated the usual mantras and offered oblations in the fire. After the peace invocation had been chanted and the flourish of music had stopped, Dhrishtadyumna took Draupadi by the hand and led her to the centre of the hall. Then he proclaimed in loud, clear tones:

"Hear ye, O princes seated in state in this assembly, here is the bow. There is the target and here are the arrows. He who sends five arrows in succession through the hole of the wheel and unerringly hits the target, if he also be of good family and presence, shall win my sister." Then he narrated to Draupadi the name, ancestry and description of the several suitors assembled there.

Many noted princes rose one after another and tried in vain to string the bow; it was too heavy and stiff for them, and they returned to their places abashed and ashamed. Sisupala, Jarasandha, Salya and Duryodhana were among these unsuccessful aspirants.

When Karna came forward, all the assemblage expected that he would be successful but he failed by just a hair's breadth and the string slid back flashing and the mighty bow jumped out of his hands like a thing of life. There was great clamour and angry talk, some even saying that it was an impossible test put up to shame the kings. Then all noises were hushed, for there arose from among the group of brahmanas a youth who advanced towards the bow.

It was Arjuna who had come disguised as a brahmana. When he stood up, wild clamour burst forth again from the crowd. The brahmanas themselves were divided in opinion, some being highly delighted that there should be among them a lad of mettle enough to compete, while others more envious or worldly wise, said what impudence it was for this brahmacharin to enter the lists when heroes like Karna, Salya and others had met with failure. But there were others again who spoke differently as they noted the noble and shapely proportions of the youth. They said: "We feel from his appearance that he is going to win. He looks sure of himself and he certainly knows what he is about. The brahmana may be physically weaker, but is it all a matter of brute strength? What about the power of austerities? Why should he not try?" And they blessed him.

Arjuna approached the place where the bow lay and asked Dhrishtadyumna: "Can a brahmana try to bend the bow?" Dhrishtadyumna answered: "O best of brahmanas, my sister will become the life-mate of any one of good family and presence, who bends the bow and shoots the target. My words stand and there will be no going back on them."

Then Arjuna meditated on Narayana, the Supreme God, and took the bow in his hand and strung it with ease. He placed an arrow on the string and looked around him with a smile, while the crowd was lost in spell-bound silence. Then without pause or hesitation he shot five arrows in succession through the revolving mechanism right into the target so that it fell down. The crowd was in tumult and there was a blare of musical instruments.

The brahmanas who were seated in the assembly in large numbers sent forth shouts of joy, waving aloft their deer-skins in exultation as though the whole community had won Draupadi. The uproar that followed was indescribable. Draupadi shone with a fresh beauty. Her face glowed with happiness which streamed out of her eyes as she looked on Arjuna. She approached him and placed the garland on his neck. Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva returned in haste to the potter's house to convey the glad news immediately to their mother. Bhima alone remained in the assembly fearing that some danger might befall Arjuna from the kshatriyas.

As anticipated by Bhima, the princes were loud in wrath. They said: "The practice of swayamvara, the choosing of a bridegroom, is not prevalent among the brahmanas. If this maiden does not care to marry a prince, she should remain a virgin and burn herself on the pyre. How can a brahmana marry her? We should oppose this marriage and prevent it so as to protect righteousness and save the practice of swayamvara from the peril which threatens it." A free fight seemed imminent. Bhima plucked a tree by the roots, and stripping it of foliage, stood armed with this formidable bludgeon, by the side of Arjuna ready for any event. Draupadi said nothing but stood holding on to the skirts of the deer-skin in which Arjuna was clad.

Krishna, Balarama and others sought to appease the princes who had created the confusion. Arjuna proceeded to the house of the potter accompanied by Draupadi.

As Bhima and Arjuna were taking Draupadi to their temporary abode, Dhrishtadyumna followed them at a distance, and, unseen by them, closely observed everything that took place there. He was amazed and delighted at what he saw, and returning, he secretly told King Drupada: "Father, I think they are the Pandavas. Draupadi accompanied them, holding to the skirts of the deer-skin of that youth and she was not at all abashed. I also followed and I saw all five and a venerable and august lady who, I have no doubt, is Kunti herself."

Invited by Drupada, Kunti and the Pandavas went to the palace. Dharmaputra confided to the king that they were the Pandavas; he also informed him of their decision to marry Draupadi in common. Drupada rejoiced at knowing that they were the Pandavas, which set at rest all anxiety regarding the enmity of Drona, but was surprised and disgusted when he heard that they would jointly marry Draupadi.

Drupada opposed this and said "How unrighteous! How did this idea get into your head, this immoral idea that goes against the traditional usage?"

Yudhishthira answered: "O king, kindly excuse us. In a time of great peril we vowed that we would share all things in common and we cannot break that pledge. Our mother has commanded us so."

Finally Drupada yielded and the marriage was celebrated.

CHAPTER XVII

INDRAPRASTHA

WHEN news of the incidents that took place during the swayamvara at Panchala reached Hastinapura, Vidura was happy. He immediately went to Dhritarashtra and said: "O King, our family has become stronger because the daughter of Drupada has become our daughter-in-law. Our stars are good."

Dhritarashtra thought in his blind fondness for his son that it was Duryodhana, who had also gone to take part in the swayamvara, that had won Draupadi. Under this mistaken impression he replied: "It is indeed, as you say, a good time for us. Go at once and bring Draupadi. Let us give Panchali a joyous welcome."

Vidura hastened to correct the mistake. He said: "The blessed Pandavas are alive and it is Arjuna who has won the daughter of Drupada. The five Pandavas have married her jointly according to the rites enjoined by the sastras. With their mother Kuntidevi they are happy and well under the care of Drupada." At these words of Vidura, Dhritarashtra felt frustrated but concealed his disappointment.

He said to Vidura with apparent joy: "O Vidura, I am delighted at your words. Are the dear Pandavas really alive? We have been mourning them as dead! The news you have now brought is balm to my heart. So the daughter of Drupada has become our daughter-in-law. Well, well, very good."

Duryodhana's jealousy and hatred redoubled when he found that the Pandavas had somehow escaped from the wax palace and after spending a year incognito had now become even more powerful on account of the alliance with the mighty king of Panchala.

Duryodhana and his brother Duhsasana went to their uncle Sakuni and said in sorrow: "Uncle, we are undone. We have been let down by relying on Purochana. Our enemies, the Pandavas, are cleverer than ourselves, and fortune also seems to favour them. Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandin have become their allies. What can we do?"

Karna and Duryodhana went to the blind Dhritarashtra. Duryodhana said: "You told Vidura that better days were ahead of us. Is it 'good time' for us that our natural enemies, the Pandavas, have so waxed in strength that they will certainly destroy us? We could not carry out our plot against them and the fact that they know about it is an added danger. It has now come to this—either we must destroy them here and now or we shall ourselves perish. Favour us with your counsel in this matter."

Dhritarashtra replied: "Dear son, what you say is true. We should not, however, let Vidura know our mind. That was why I spoke to him in that manner. Let me now hear your suggestions as to what we should do."

Duryodhana said:

"I feel so distracted that no plan occurs to me. Perhaps, we may take advantage of the fact that these Pandavas are not born of one and the same mother and create enmity between the sons of Madri and those of Kunti; we can also try to bribe Drupada into joining our side. That he has given away his daughter in marriage to the Pandavas will not stand in the way of our making him an ally. There is nothing that cannot be accomplished by the power of wealth."

Karna smiled and said: "This is but futile talk."

Duryodhana continued: "We should somehow make sure that the Pandavas do not come here and demand of us the kingdom that is now in our possession. We may commission a few brahmanas to spread convenient rumours in Drupada's city and severally tell the Pandavas that they would meet with great danger if they were to go to Hastinapura. Then the Pandavas would fear to come here and we shall be safe from them."

Karna replied: "This too is idle talk. You cannot frighten them that way."

Duryodhana continued: "Can we not create discord among the Pandavas by means of Draupadi? Her polyandrous marriage is very convenient for us. We shall arouse doubts and jealousies in their minds through the efforts of experts in the science of erotics. We shall certainly succeed. We can get a beautiful woman to beguile some of the sons of Kunti and thus make Draupadi turn against them. If Draupadi begins to suspect any of them, we can invite him to Hastinapura and use him so that our plan prospers."

Karna laughed this also to scorn. He said: "None of your proposals is any good. You cannot conquer the Pandavas by stratagem. When they were here and were like callow birds with undeveloped wings, we found we could not deceive them, and you think we can deceive them now, when they have acquired experience and are moreover under the protection of Drupada. They have seen through your designs. Stratagems will not do hereafter. You cannot sow dissensions among them. You cannot bribe the wise and honourable Drupada. He will not give up the Pandavas on any account. Draupadi also can never be turned against them. Therefore, there is only one way left for us, and that is to attack them before they grow stronger and other friends join them. We should make a surprise attack on the Pandavas and Drupada before Krishna joins them with his Yadava army. We should take the heroic way out of our difficulty, as befits kshatriyas. Trickery will prove useless."

Thus spoke Karna. Dhritarashtra could not make up his mind. The king, therefore, sent for Bhishma and Drona and consulted them.

Bhishma was very happy when he heard that the Pandavas were alive and well as guests of King Drupada of Panchala, whose daughter they had married. Consulted on the steps to be taken, Bhishma, wise with the ripe knowledge of right and wrong, replied: "The proper course will be to welcome them back and give them half the kingdom. The citizens of the state also desire such a settlement. This is the only way to maintain the dignity of our family. There is much loose talk not creditable to you about the fire incident at the wax house. All blame, even all suspicion, will be set at rest if you invite the Pandavas and hand over half kingdom to them. This is my advice."

Drona also gave the same counsel and suggested sending a proper messenger to bring about an amicable settlement and establish peace.

Karna flew into a rage at this suggestion. He was very much devoted to Duryodhana and could not at all bear the idea of giving a portion of the kingdom to the Pandavas. He told Dhritarashtra:

"I am surprised that Drona, who has received wealth and honours at your hands, has made such a suggestion. A king should examine critically the advice of his ministers before accepting or rejecting it."

At these words of Karna, Drona, his old eyes full of anger, said: "O wicked man, you are advising the king to go on the wrong path. If Dhritarashtra does not do what Bhishma and myself have advised, the Kauravas will certainly meet with destruction in the near future."

Then Dhritarashtra sought the advice of Vidura who replied:

"The counsel given by Bhishma, the head of our race, and Drona, the master, is wise and just and should not be disregarded. The Pandavas are also your children like Duryodhana and his brothers. You should realise that those who advise you to injure the Pandavas, are really bent upon the destruction of the race. Drupada and his sons as well as Krishna and the Yadavas are staunch allies of the Pandavas. It is impossible to defeat them in battle. Karna's advice is foolish and wrong. It is bruited abroad that we tried to kill the Pandavas in the wax house, and we should first of all try to clear ourselves of the blame. The citizens and the whole country are delighted to know that the Pandavas are alive and they desire to see them once again. Do not listen to the words of Duryodhana. Karna and Sakuni are but raw youths, ignorant of statesmanship and incompetent to advise. Follow Bhishma's advice."

In the end Dhritarashtra determined to establish peace by giving half the kingdom to the sons of Pandu. He sent Vidura to the kingdom of Panchala to fetch the Pandavas and Draupadi.

Vidura went to the city of King Drupada in a speedy vehicle taking along with him many kinds of jewels and other valuable presents.

Vidura rendered due honour to King Drupada and requested him on behalf of Dhritarashtra to send the Pandavas with Panchali to Hastinapura.

Drupada mistrusted Dhritarashtra, but he merely said: "The Pandavas may do as they like."

Vidura went to Kuntidevi and prostrated himself before her. She said: "Son of Vichitravirya, you saved my sons. They are, therefore, your children. I trust you. I shall do as you advise." She was also suspicious of Dhritarashtra's intentions.

Vidura thus assured her: "Your children will never meet with destruction. They will inherit the kingdom and acquire great renown. Come, let us go.” At last Drupada also gave his assent and Vidura returned to Hastinapura with the Pandavas, Kunti and Draupadi.

In jubilant welcome of the beloved princes who were returning home after long years of exile and travail, the streets of Hastinapura had been sprinkled with water and decorated with flowers. As had been already decided, half the kingdom was made over to the Pandavas and Yudhishthira was duly crowned king.

Dhritarashtra blessed the newly crowned Yudhishthira and bade him farewell with these words:

‘My brother Pandu made this kingdom prosperous. May you prove a worthy heir to his renown! King Pandu delighted in abiding by my advice. Love me in the same manner My sons are wicked and proud. I have made this settlement so that there may be no strife or hatred between you. Go to Khandavaprastha and make it your capital. Our ancestors Pururavas, Nahusha and Yayati ruled the kingdom from there. That was our ancient capital. Re-establish that and be famous.”

In this manner Dhritarashtra spoke affectionately to Yudhishthira. The Pandavas renovated that ruined city, built palaces and forts and renamed it Indraprastha, and it grew in wealth and beauty and became the admiration of the world. The Pandavas ruled there happily for thirty-six years with their mother and Draupadi, never straying from the path of dharma.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SARANGA BIRDS

In the stories narrated in the Puranas, birds and beasts speak like men, and sometimes they give sound advice and even teach spiritual wisdom. But the natural qualities of those creatures are adroitly made to peep through this human veil.

One of the characteristic beauties of the Puranic literature is this happy fusion of nature and imagination. In a delightful passage in the Ramayana, Hanuman, who is described as very wise and learned, is made to frolic with apish joy, when he imagined that the beautiful damsel he saw at Ravana’s inner courtyard was Sita.

It is usual to entertain children with stories in which birds and beasts are made to speak. But the stories of the Puranas are meant for elderly people, and in them usually some background is given in explanation of animals having the gift of human speech. The usual expedient employed is a previous birth when those creatures were human beings. For instance, a deer was a rishi in a previous birth, or a fox a king—the subsequent degradation being due to a curse. In such cases the deer will act as a deer and yet speak as a rishi, and in the fox the vulpine nature is shot through with the characteristics of a wise and experienced king. The stories are thereby made interesting vehicles of the great truths they sometimes convey.

Khandavaprastha, that forest full of uneven places and thorns and prickles and cumbered with the crumbling vestiges of a long dead city, was indeed a frightful place when it came into the possession of the Pandavas. Birds and beasts had made it their abode, and it was infested with thieves and wicked men. Krishna and Arjuna resolved to set fire to the forest and construct a new city in its place.

A saranga bird was living there with its four fledgelings. The male bird was pleasantly roaming about in the forest with another female bird neglecting wife and children. The mother bird looked after its young ones. As the forest was set on fire as commanded by Krishna and Arjuna and the fire spread in all directions, doing its destructive work, the worried mother bird began to lament: ‘The fire is coming nearer and nearer burning everything, and soon it will be here and destroy us. All forest creatures are in despair and the air is full of the agonising crash of falling trees. Poor wingless babies! You will become a prey to the fire. What shall I do? Your father has deserted us, and I am not strong enough to fly away carrying you with me.”

To the mother who was wailing thus, the children said:

“Mother, do not torment yourself on our account: leave us to our fate. If we die here, we shall attain a good birth in some future life. If you give up your life for our sake, our family will become extinct. Fly to a place of safety, take another mate and be happy. You will soon have other children and be able to forget us. Mother, reflect and do what is best for our race.”

Despite this earnest entreaty, the mother had no mind to leave her children. She said: “I shall remain here and perish in the flames with you.”

This is the background of the story of the birds: A rishi named Mandapala long lived faithful to his vow of perfect brahmacharya; but when he sought entry to the higher regions, the gate-keeper said: "There is no place here for a childless man" and turned him back. He was then born as a saranga bird and lived with a female companion named Jarita. She laid four eggs. Then he left Jarita and wandered in the woods with another female companion, Lapita.

The four eggs of Jarita hatched in time and they were the four birds mentioned above. As they were the children of a rishi they could cheer and encourage their mother in the way they did.

The mother bird told her children: "There is a rat-hole by the side of this tree. I shall put you there. You can get into the hole and escape the fire. I shall close the mouth of the hole with earth and the fire will not touch you. When the fire dies down I shall let you out."

The children would not agree. They said: "The rat in the hole will devour us. It is better to perish in the flames than to die ignobly by being eaten up by rats."

The mother bird tried to relieve the fears of the children and said: "I saw an eagle devour the rat. There is now no danger for you inside the hole."

But the children said: "There are sure to be other rats in the hole. Our danger is not ended by the killing of one rat by the eagle. Kindly save your life by flying before the fire reaches us and this tree catches fire. We cannot get into the rat-hole. Why should you sacrifice your life for our sake? How have we merited it, who have done nothing for you? We have only brought you unhappiness since we came into the world. Take another mate and live happily. We shall ascend to higher regions if we are consumed in the fire; and if we providentially escape, you can look for us here when you return after the fire has subsided. Do not delay. Go at once." Urged by the children, the mother bird flew away.

The flames enveloped the tree, but the little birds remained unperturbed and spent their time chirping merrily to one another.

The eldest said: "The wise man will scent danger beforehand and hold his mind from wavering when danger comes."

The younger brothers replied: "You are old and wise. Only a rare soul will be firm like you."

With smiling faces, all of them greeted the fire when it approached them, with the following words:

O fire, our mother has left us. We have not seen our father, for after we had been hatched he was no more to be seen. Primal one, smoke is your flag. You are our sole refuge, wingless and helpless as we are. There is no one else to take care of us. We throw ourselves on your protection." Thus they prayed to the Fire god like brahmana brahmacharins reciting the Vedic chants.

The fire which destroyed the whole forest, mercifully left the baby birds unscathed.

When the fire had subsided, the mother bird came back and saw with wonder that her children were safe and chirping merrily; she embraced them and was intensely happy.

While the fire was raging, the male bird, anxious for the safety of his young ones, had expressed his fears to his new love-bird Lapita. She had petulantly up-braided him. Hearing his repeated laments "Is it so?" she said: "I know your mind, I know that you desire to go back to Jarita, having had enough of me. Why falsely bring in the fire and the children? You have yourself told me that the children of Jarita would never perish in fire since the Fire god has given you that boon. You may as well tell the truth and go away, if you like, to your beloved Jarita. I shall only be another of the many trusting females betrayed by unworthy males and cast out wandering in the forest. You may go."

The bird Mandapala said: "Your assumption is untrue. I took birth as a bird for obtaining children and I am naturally anxious about them. I shall just go and see them and then come back to you " Having thus consoled his new mate, he went to the tree where Jarita was seated.

Jarita paid no attention to her consort but remained absorbed in joy at finding her children alive. Then she turned to her husband and asked in an indifferent tone why he had come.

He replied with affection: "Are my children happy? Who is the eldest among them?"

Then Jarita cut in icily: "Do you greatly care? Go back to her for whom you abandoned me. Be happy with her."

Mandapala philosophised: "A woman will not care for her husband after she has become a mother. Such is the way of the world. Even the blameless Vasishtha was thus ignored by Arundhati."

CHAPTER XIX

JARASANDHA

THE Pandavas ruled Indraprastha in all glory. Those who surrounded Yudhishthira urged him to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice and assume the title of "Emperor." It is evident that imperialism had an irresistible glamour even in those days.

Yudhishthira sought Sri Krishna's advice in this matter. When Krishna learnt that Dharmaputra desired to see him, he set out in a chariot harnessed with swift horses and reached Indraprastha.

Yudhishthira said: "My people urge me to perform Rajasuya, but as you know, only he who can secure the respect and allegiance of all kings, can perform that sacrifice and win the status of emperor. Advise me. You are not among those whose affection makes them blind and partial. Nor are you one of those who advise to please and whose counsel is pleasant rather than true or wholesome."

Krishna replied: "Quite so—and that is why you cannot be emperor while the mighty Jarasandha of Magadha is alive and unconquered. He has conquered many kings and holds them in subjection. All the kshatriyas—including the redoubtable Sisupala himself—are afraid of his prowess and are submissive to him. Have you not heard of the wicked Kamsa, the son of Ugrasena? After he had become the son-in-law and ally of Jarasandha I and my people attacked Jarasandha. After three years of continuous fighting we had to acknowledge defeat and we left Mathura and moved to Dwaraka in the west, and built a new city where we are living in peace and plenty. Even if Duryodhana, Karna and others do not object to your assuming the title of emperor, Jarasandha will certainly oppose it, and the only way to overcome his opposition is to defeat and kill him. You can then not only perform the Rajasuya but also rescue and win the adherence of the kings who languish in his prisons."

At these words of Krishna, Yudhishthira said: "I agree. I am but one of the many kings who rule their kingdoms with fairness and justice and lead happy unambitious lives. It is mere vanity and vainglory to desire to become an emperor. Why should not a king rest satisfied with his own kingdom? So, I shall give up this desire to be an emperor, and, really, the title has no temptations for me. It is my brothers who wish it.

When you yourself are afraid of Jarasandha what can we hope to do?"

Bhima did not at all like this spirit of pusillanimous contentment.

Bhima said: "Ambition is the noblest virtue of a king. What is the good of being strong if one does not know his own strength? I cannot reconcile myself to live a life of idle ease and contentment He who casts off indolence and properly employs political means, can conquer even those stronger than himself. Strength reinforced by stratagem will surely do much. What, indeed, cannot be accomplished by a combination of my physical strength, Krishna's wisdom and Arjuna's dexterity? We can conquer Jarasandha's might, if we three join and set about it without doubts or fears."

Krishna interposed: "Jarasandha should certainly be slain and fully deserves it. He has unjustly cast eighty-six princes in prison. He has planned to immolate a hundred kings and is waiting to lay hold of fourteen more. If Bhima and Arjuna agree, I shall accompany them and together we will slay that king by stratagem and set free the imprisoned princes. I like this suggestion."

Yudhishthira was not pleased with this advice. He said: "This may really mean sacrificing Bhima and Arjuna who are to me as my two eyes, merely to gratify a vain desire to be an emperor. I do not like to send them on this dangerous errand It seems to me far better to give up the idea altogether."

Arjuna said: "What is the use to us of an existence without heroic deeds, born as we are of an illustrious line? A kshatriya, though endowed with all other good qualities, will not become famous if he does not exert himself. Enthusiasm is the mother of success. We can seize fortune if we do our duties energetically. Even a powerful man may fail if, through lassitude, he does not employ the means he has. Failure is due, in the vast majority of cases, to ignorance of one's own strength. We know we are strong, and we are not afraid of using our strength to the utmost. Why should Yudhishthira suppose that we are incapable of this? When we have become old, it will be time to assume the ochre robe, resort to the forest and pass the rest of our days in penance and austerities. Now, we should lead strenuous lives and do heroic deeds worthy of the traditions of our race."

Krishna was delighted to hear these words and said:

"What else can Arjuna, born of Kunti in the Bharata race, advise? Death comes to all, the hero as well as the sluggard; but the noblest duty of a kshatriya is to be true to his race and faith, and overcoming his foes in righteous battle, to win glory."

Finally Yudhishthira assented to the unanimous opinion that their duty lay in slaying Jarasandha.

This conversation has a curiously modern ring about it and shows that powerful men in ancient days used very much the same specious reasoning as now.

CHAPTER XX

THE SLAYING OF JARASANDHA

BRIHADRATHA, the commander of three regiments, reigned in the kingdom of Magadha and attained celebrity as a great hero. He married the twin daughters of the raja of Kasi and vowed to them that he would not show any partiality to either.

Brihadratha was not blessed with a child for a long time. When he became old, he handed over his kingdom to his ministers, went to the forest with his two wives and engaged himself in austerities. He went to Sage Kausika of the Gautama family, with a sorrowful longing for children in his heart, and when the sage was moved with pity and asked him what he wanted, he answered: "I am childless and have come to the forest giving up my kingdom; give me children."

The sage was filled with compassion and, even as he was thinking how to help the king, a mango fruit fell into his lap. He took it and gave it to the king with this blessing: "Take it. Your wish will be fulfilled."

The king cut the fruit into two halves and gave one to each wife. He did so to keep his vow not to show partiality to either. Some time after they had partaken of the fruit, the wives became pregnant. The delivery took place in due course; but instead of bringing the expected joy, it plunged them into greater grief than before, for they each gave birth to but a half of a child—each half a monstrous birth which seemed a revolting lump. They were indeed two equal and complementary portions of one baby, consisting of one eye, one leg, half a face, one ear and so on.

Seized with grief, they commanded their attendants to tie the gruesome pieces in a cloth and cast them away. The attendants did as they were instructed and threw the cloth bundle on a heap of refuse in the street.

A cannibal rakshasi chanced upon that place. She was elated at seeing the two pieces of flesh and, as she gathered them up both at once, accidently the halves came together the right way, and they at once adhered together and changed into a whole living child, perfect in every detail. The surprised rakshasi did not wish to kill the child. She took on the guise of a beautiful woman and, going to the king, presented the child to him saying: "This is your child."

The king was immensely delighted and handed it over to his two wives.

This child became known as Jarasandha. He grew up into a man of immense physical strength, but his body had one weakness—namely, that being made up by the fusion of two separate parts, it could be split again into two, if sufficient force were used

This interesting story embodies the important truth that two sundered parts joined together will still remain weak, with a tendency to split.

When the conquest and slaying of Jarasandha had been resolved upon, Sri Krishna said: "Hamsa, Hidimbaka, Kamsa and other allies of Jarasandha are no more; and now that he is isolated, this is the right time to kill him. It is useless to fight with armies. He must be provoked to a single combat and slain."

According to the code of honour of those days, a kshatriya had to accept the challenge to a duel—whether with or without weapons. The latter sort was a fight to the death with weighted gauntlets or a wrestling to the death in catch-as-catch-can style. This was the kshatriya tradition to which Krishna and the Pandavas had recourse for slaying Jarasandha.

They disguised themselves as men who had taken religious vows, clad in robes of bark-fibre and carrying the holy darbha grass in their hands. Thus they entered the kingdom of Magadha and arrived at the capital of Jarasandha.

Jarasandha was disturbed by portents of ill-omen. To ward off the threatened danger, he had propitiatory rites performed by the priests and himself took to fasts and penance. Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna entered the palace unarmed. Jarasandha received them with respect as their noble bearing seemed to indicate an illustrious origin. Bhima and Arjuna made no reply to his words of welcome because they wished to avoid having to tell lies.

Krishna spoke on their behalf: "These two are observing a vow of silence for the present as a part of their austerities. They can speak only after midnight." Jarasandha entertained them in the hall of sacrifice and returned to the palace.

It was the practice of Jarasandha to meet noble guests who had taken vows and talk to them at their leisure and convenience, and so he called at midnight to see them. Their conduct made Jarasandha suspicious, and he also observed that they had on their hands the scars made by the bow-string and had besides the proud bearing of kshatriyas.

When Jarasandha demanded the truth of them they said frankly: "We are your foes and seek instant combat. You can choose one of us at will to fight with you."

After acquainting himself as to who they were, Jarasandha said: "Krishna, you are a cowherd and Arjuna is a mere boy. Bhima is famous for his physical strength. So, I wish to fight with him." Since Bhima was unarmed, Jarasandha chivalrously agreed to fight him without weapons.

Bhima and Jarasandha were so equally matched in strength that they fought with each other continuously for thirteen days without taking rest or refreshments, while Krishna and Arjuna looked on in alternating hope and anxiety. On the fourteenth day, Jarasandha showed signs of exhaustion, and Krishna prompted Bhima that the time had come to make an end of him. At once Bhima lifted him and whirling him round and round a hundred times, dashed him to the earth and seizing his legs tore his body asunder into two halves. And Bhima roared in exultation.

The two halves at once joined and Jarasandha, thus made whole, leapt up into vigorous life and again attacked Bhima.

Bhima aghast at the sight, was at a loss what to do, when he saw Krishna pick up a straw, tear it into two, and cast the bits in opposite directions. Bhima took the hint, and when once again he tore Jarasandha asunder he threw the two portions in opposite directions, so that they could not come together and join. Thus did Jarasandha meet his end.

The captive princes were released and Jarasandha's son was crowned King of Magadha, and Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna returned to Indraprastha.

With Jarasandha gone, the way was now clear for the

Rajasuya which the Pandavas performed with great pomp and splendour. Yudhishthira assumed the title of "Emperor" The celebrations were marred by only one incident. Towards the close of the festive celebrations, at the time of paying the first honour, Sisupala behaved disrespectfully in the assembly of princes and provoked a fight with Krishna in which he was slain. This story is told in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST HONOUR

THE practice of staging a "walk-out" from an assembly in protest against something is nothing new. We learn from the Mahabharata that "walk-out" was resorted to even in ancient times.

The India of those days consisted of a number of independent states. Though there was one dharma and one culture throughout the land, the autonomy of each state was scrupulosly respected. Occasionally, some strong and ambitious monarch would seek the assent of his compeers to his overlordship, which would sometimes be given without question. After receiving this assent he would perform a grand Rajasuya sacrifice, which all the acquiescing kings would attend in token of acknowledgement of his supremacy. In accordance with this custom, the Pandavas invited the other kings after the slaying of Jarasandha and performed the Rajasuya.

The time came for doing the honours of the occasion. The custom was to render first honour to the guest who was considered most worthy of taking precedence over all others. The question arose as to who should be honoured first. The grandsire was emphatically of opinion that Sri Krishna, the king of Dwaraka, should be honoured first, which was also Yudhishthira's own opinion.

Yudhishthira followed the advice and under his instructions Sahadeva offered to Sri Krishna the honours enjoined by tradition.

Sisupala, the king of Chedi, who hated Krishna as wickedness alone can hate goodness, could not tolerate it.

He laughed aloud in derision and said: "How ridiculous and unjust, but I am not surprised. The man who sought advice was born in illegitimacy. (This was an insulting allusion to the sons of Kunti) The man who gave advice was born of one who ever declines from high to low. (This is in reference to the fact that Bhishma was born of Ganga, the river naturally flowing from higher to lower levels.) And he who did the honours was also born illegitimately. And what shall I say of the man honoured! A fool by birth and a cowherd by breeding. Dumb indeed must be the members of this assembly if they have not a word to say to this! This is no place for worthy men." Some of the assembled princes applauded Sisupala. Encouraged by their applause he addressed Yudhishthira:

"When there are so many kings gathered here, it is a shame that you paid the first honour to Krishna. Not to render respect where it is rightly due and to render it where it is not merited are both equally grave offences. It is a pity that, for all your imperial pretensions you are ignorant of this."

Getting more and more angry as he spoke, he continued: "Ignoring the many kings and heroes who are here at your own invitation and in malicious despise of them, you have paid royal honours to a cowherd boor, a mere nobody; Vasudeva, the father of Krishna, was but a servant of Ugrasena. He is not even of royal blood. Is this the place and the occasion to show your vulgar partiality for Krishna, the son of Devaki? Is this worthy of the children of Pandu? O sons of Pandu, you are raw, untaught youths, altogether ignorant of the way to conduct a royal assembly. This dotard Bhishma guided you foolishly and thus made fools of you. Krishna—why, Krishna is no ruler at all! O Yudhishthira, why did you dare to do this wretch first honour in this illustrious assemblage of kings? He has not even the merit of age—and if you admire grey hair, is not his father alive? You could not have honoured him as your preceptor surely, for your preceptor is Drona who is here in this assembly. Is it as an expert in performing sacrifices that you have honoured him? It cannot be, for Vyasa, the great master, is present. It would have been better even if you had paid the first honour to Bhishma, for dotard as he is, he has still the merit of being the oldest man of your house. Your family teacher, Kripacharya, is also present in this assembly. How could you then pay the first honour to this cowherd? Aswatthama, the hero who is expert in all sastras, is here. How did you choose Krishna, forgetting him?

"Among the princes assembled here, there is Duryodhana. And there is also Karna, the disciple of Parasurama. Is he not the hero who fought Jarasandha single-handed and defeated him? Leaving him aside, out of childish partiality, you chose Krishna for the first honour—Krishna who is neither royal, nor heroic, nor learned, nor holy, nor even hoary—who is nothing but a low cowherd! Thus you have dishonoured us all, whom you have invited here.

"O kings, it is not out of fear that we assented to Yudhishthira's assuming the title of 'emperor' We personally do not much care whether he is friend or foe. But, having heard much prate of his righteousness, we wanted to see him uphold the flag of dharma. He has now wantonly dishonoured us, after all that talk of virtue and dharma. What virtue or dharma was there in his giving priority of honour to this villain Krishna who killed Jarasandha in an unjust manner? You should henceforth call Yudhishthira an unrighteous person.

"O Krishna, what impudence on your part to accept the undeserved honour which these misguided Pandavas did you! Did you forget yourself? Or did you forget decent tradition? Or was it just a case of a dog snatching at a remnant of food which nobody cared to claim or guard? Do you not really see that this farce is a ghastly mockery and disgrace to yourself? It is like the mockery of showing beautiful things to a blind man or offering a maiden in marriage to a eunuch. Likewise, these kingly honours are really an affront to you.

"It is now evident that the would-be emperor Yudhishthira, the senile Bhishma, and this fellow Krishna are all made of the same stuff."

After Sisupala had spoken these harsh words, he rose from his seat and walked out calling upon the other kings to join him in resenting the insult. Many of them followed him.

Yudhishthira ran after them and tried to appease them with sweet words of peace but in vain, for they were too angry to be appeased. Sisupala's aggressive vanity waxed to fighting pitch, and there ensued a terrible fight between Krishna and Sisupala, in which the latter was slain.

The Rajasuya was duly celebrated and Yudhishthira recognised emperor.

CHAPTER XXII

SAKUNI COMES IN

At the close of the Rajasuya, the princes, priests and elders, who had gathered for the purpose, took leave and returned to their places. Vyasa also came to say farewell. Dharmaputra rose and received him with due respect and sat by his side. The sage said: "O son of Kunti, you have got the title of 'emperor' which you eminently deserve. May the illustrious Kuru race gain even greater glory through you. Give me leave to return to my hermitage."

Yudhishthira touched the feet of his progenitor and guru and said: "O master, you alone can remove my apprehensions: wise men have predicted from portents the happenings of catastrophic events. Has this prediction been fulfilled by the death of Sisupala or is more to ensue?"

Bhagavan Vyasa replied: "Dear child, much of sorrow and suffering is in store for thirteen years to come. The portents indicate the destruction of the kshatriya race and are not exhausted with the death of Sisupala. Far from it. Hundreds of kings will perish, and the old order of things will pass away. This catastrophe will spring out of the enmity between you and your brothers on the one side and your cousins, the Dhritarashtras, on the other. It will culminate in a war resulting in practical annihilation of the kshatriya race. No one can go against destiny. Be firm and steadfast in righteousness. Be vigilant and rule the kingdom, farewell." And Vyasa blessed Yudhishthira.

Vyasa's words filled Yudhishthira with grief and with a great repugnance for worldly ambition and life itself. He informed his brothers of the prediction of unavoidable racial disaster. Life seemed to him a bitter and weary business and his destiny particularly cruel and unbearable.

Arjuna said: "You are a king and it is not right for you to be agitated. Let us meet destiny with undaunted front and do our duty."

Yudhishthira replied: "Brothers, may God protect us and give us wisdom. For my part, I take this vow never to speak harshly to my brothers or to my kinsmen for the next thirteen years. I shall avoid all pretext for conflict. I shall never give way to anger, which is the root cause of enmity; it shall be my study to give no occasion for anger or pretext for hostility. Thus shall we profit by Bhagavan Vyasa's warning." His brothers expressed cordial assent.

The first event of the series which culminated in the devastating slaughter on the blood-sodden field of Kurukshetra and the event which was the evil root of all, was the gambling match into which Yudhishthira was inveigled by Sakuni, who was Duryodhana's evil genius. Why did the wise and good Yudhishthira suffer himself to be persuaded to this step which he must have known to hold evil possibilities?

The main cause was his fixed resolve to be on amicable terms with his cousins by not opposing their wishes and a friendly invitation to dice could not be summarily turned down, since the etiquette of those days made it a point of honour to accept a game of equal hazard. Out of his very anxiety to foster goodwill, he laid open the field for the poisonous seed of hatred and death. Here is an illustration of the futility of human plans, however well-meant or wise, without divine aid. Our best wisdom is vain against fate, and if destiny is kind, our very follies turn to our advantage.

While Dharmaputra was care-worn with solicitude to avoid a quarrel at all costs, Duryodhana was burning with jealousy at the thought of the prosperity of the Pandavas which he had witnessed in their capital during the Rajasuya sacrifice. Duryodhana saw unprecedented wealth, attractive and sight-eluding crystal doors and many pieces of exquisite artistry in the court-hall of Yudhishthira, all suggestive of great prosperity. He also saw how glad the kings of many countries were to become the allies of the Pandavas. This gave him unbearable grief. He was so absorbed in sorrow at the prosperity of the Pandavas that he did not at first hear Sakuni who was by his side, speaking to him.

Sakuni asked: "Why are you sighing? Why are you tormented with sorrow?"

Duryodhana replied: "Yudhishthira, surrounded by his brothers, is like Indra, the king of gods. Before the very eyes of the assembled kings Sisupala was slain and not one of them had the courage to come forward to avenge him. Like the vaisyas who live by trade, they bartered their honour and jewels and riches for Yudhishthira's goodwill. Now can I avoid giving way to grief after seeing all this? What is the good of living?"

Sakuni said: "O Duryodhana, the Pandavas are your brothers. It is not right on your part to be jealous of their prosperity. They are but enjoying their legitimate inheritance. By their good fortune they have prospered and flourished without doing any injury to others. Why should you be jealous? How can their strength and happiness diminish your greatness? Your brothers and relations stand by you and obey you. Drona, Aswatthama and Karna are on your side. Why do you grieve when Bhishma, Kripa, Jayadratha, Somadatta and myself are your supporters? You can conquer even the whole world. Do not give way to grief."

At these words, Duryodhana said: "O Sakuni, it is true that I have so many to support me. Why should we not wage war and drive the Pandavas out of Indraprastha?"

But Sakuni said: "No. That will not be easy, but I know a way to drive Yudhishthira out of Indraprastha without a fight or the shedding of blood."

The eyes of Duryodhana lighted up, but it seemed too good to be true. He asked incredulously: "Uncle, is it possible to overcome the Pandavas without sacrificing any life? What is your plan?"

Sakuni replied: "Yudhishthira is fond of the game of dice and being unskilful, is altogether ignorant of its tricks and the opportunity it offers to cleverer people. If we invite him to a game, he would accept, following the tradition of the kshatriyas. I know the tricks of the game and I shall play on your behalf. Yudhishthira will be helpless as a child against me. I shall win his kingdom and wealth for you without shedding a drop of blood."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE INVITATION

DURYODHANA and Sakuni went to Dhritarashtra. Sakuni opened the conversation. He said: "O king, Duryodhana is wan with grief and anxiety. You are paying no attention to his unbearable sorrow. Why this unconcern?"

Dhritarashtra who doted on his son embraced Duryodhana and said: "I do not see why you should be disconsolate. What is here that you already do not enjoy? The whole world is at your feet. When you are surrounded by all kinds of pleasures like the very gods, why should you pine in sorrow? You have learnt the Vedas, archery, and other sciences from the best of masters. As my first born, you have inherited the throne. What is left you to wish for? Tell me."

Duryodhana replied: "Father, like anybody else, rich or poor, I eat and cover my nakedness, but I find life unbearable. What is the use of leading such a life?" And then he revealed in detail the envy and hatred that were eating into his vitals and depriving life of its savour. He referred to the prosperity he had seen in the capital of the Pandavas which to him was bitterer than loss of his all would have been. He burst out: "Contentment with one's lot is not characteristic of a kshatriya. Fear and pity lower the dignity of kings. My wealth and pleasures do not give me any satisfaction since I have witnessed the greater prosperity of Yudhishthira. O king, the Pandavas have grown, while we have shrunk."

Dhritarashtra said: "Beloved child, you are the eldest son of my royal spouse and me and heir to the glory and greatness of our renowned race. Do not cherish any hatred towards the Pandavas. Sorrow and death will be the sole result of hatred of kith and kin, especially when they are blameless. Tell me, why do you hate the guileless Yudhishthira? Is not his prosperity ours too? Our friends are his friends. He has not the least jealousy or hatred towards us. You are equal to him in heroism and ancestry. Why should you be jealous of your brother? No. You should not be jealous." Thus said the old king who, though overfond of his son, did not occasionally hesitate to say what he felt to be just.

Duryodhana did not at all like the advice of his father, and his reply was not very respectful.

He replied: "The man without commonsense, but immersed in learning, is like a wooden ladle immersed in savoury food which it neither tastes nor benefits from. You have much learning of statecraft but have no state wisdom at all, as your advice to me clearly shows. The way of the world is one thing and the administration of a state is quite another. Thus has Brihaspati said: 'Forbearance and contentment, though the duties of ordinary men, are not virtues in kings.' The kshatriya's duty is a constant seeking of victory." Duryodhana spoke thus quoting maxims of politics and citing examples and making the worse appear the better reason.

Then Sakuni intervened and set forth in detail his infallible plan of inviting Yudhishthira to play the game of dice, defeating him utterly and divesting him of his all without recourse to arms.

The wicked Sakuni wound up with saying: "It is enough if you merely send for the son of Kunti to play the game of dice. Leave the rest to me."

Duryodhana added: "Sakuni will win for me the riches of the Pandavas without a fight, if you would only agree to invite Yudhishthira."

Dhritarashtra said: "Your suggestion does not seem proper. Let us ask Vidura about it. He will advise us rightly."

But Duryodhana would not hear of consulting Vidura. He said to his father: "Vidura will only give us the platitudes of ordinary morality, which will not help us to our object. The policy of kings must be very different from the goody maxims of text-books, and is sterner stuff of which the test is success. Moreover, Vidura does not like me and is partial to the Pandavas. You know this as well as I do."

Dhritarashtra said: "The Pandavas are strong. I do not think it wise to antagonize them. The game of dice will only lead to enmity. The passions resulting from the game will know no bounds. We should not do it."

But Duryodhana was importunate: "Wise statesmanship lies in casting off all fear and protecting oneself by one's own efforts. Should we not force the issue while yet we are more powerful than they? That will be real foresight. A lost opportunity may never come again, and it is not as though we invented the game of dice to injure the Pandavas. It is an ancient pastime which kshatriyas have always indulged in, and if it will now serve us to win our cause without bloodshed, where is the harm?"

Dhritarashtra replied: "Dear son, I have grown old. Do as you like. But the line that you are taking does not appeal to me. I am sure you will repent later. This is the work of destiny."

In the end, out-argued and through sheer fatigue and hopelessness of dissuading his son, Dhritarashtra assented, and ordered the servants to prepare a hall of games. Yet he could not forbear consulting Vidura in secret about the matter.

Vidura said: "O king, this will undoubtedly bring about the ruin of our race by raising up unquenchable hate."

Dhritarashtra, who could not oppose the demand of his son, said: "If fortune favours us I have no fear regarding this game. If, on the contrary, fortune goes against us, how could we help it? For, destiny is all-powerful. Go and invite Yudhishthira on my behalf to come and play dice." Thus commanded, Vidura went to Yudhishthira with an invitation.

The weak-witted Dhritarashtra, over-persuaded, yielded to the desire of his son through his attachment to him in spite of the fact that he knew this was the way that destiny was working itself out.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WAGER

AT THE sight of Vidura, Yudhishthira anxiously inquired: "Why are you so cheerless? Is it well with all our relations in Hastinapura? Are the king and the princes well?"

Vidura acquainted him with his mission: "Everyone in Hastinapura is well. How fares it with you all? I have come to invite you on behalf of King Dhritarashtra to come and see the newly erected hall of games. A beautiful hall has been erected there even like yours. The king would like you to come with your brothers, see everything, have a game of dice and return to your capital."

Yudhishthira seemed to ask counsel of Vidura: "Wagering games create quarrels among kshatriyas. A wise man will avoid them if he can. We are ever abiding by your advice. What would you have us do?"

Vidura replied: "Everyone is aware that the playing of dice is the root of many evils. I did my best to oppose this idea. Still the king has commanded me to invite you and I have come. You may do as you like."

Despite this warning, Yudhishthira went to Hastinapura with his brothers and retinue.

It may be asked why the wise Yudhishthira responded to the invitation. Three reasons may be given. Men rush consciously on their ruin impelled by lust, gambling and drink. Yudhishthira was fond of gambling. The kshatriya tradition made it a matter of etiquette and honour not to refuse an invitation to a game of dice. There is a third reason too. True to the vow he took at the time Vyasa had warned him of the quarrels that would arise leading to destruction of the race, Yudhishthira would not give any occasion for displeasure or complaint by refusing the invitation of Dhritarashtra. These causes conspired with his natural inclination to make Yudhishthira accept the invitation and go to Hastinapura. The Pandavas and their retinue stopped in the magnificent palace reserved for them. Yudhishthira rested on the day of arrival, and after the daily routine of duties, went to the hall of games next morning.

After the exchange of customary greetings, Sakuni announced to Yudhishthira that the cloth for playing the game had been spread and invited him to it.

Yudhishthira at first said: "O king, gambling is bad. It is not through heroism or merit that one succeeds in a game of chance. Asita, Devala and other wise rishis who were well versed in worldly affairs have declared that gambling should be avoided since it offers scope for deceit. They have also said that conquest in battle is the proper path for the kshatriyas. You are not unaware of it."

But a part of himself, weakened by addiction to gambling, was at war with his judgment and in his heart of hearts Yudhishthira desired to play. In his discussion with Sakuni, we see this inner conflict. The keen-witted Sakuni spotted this weakness at once and said: "What is wrong with the game? What, in fact, is a battle? What is even a discussion between Vedic scholars? The learned man wins victory over the ignorant. The better man wins in every case. It is just a test of strength or skill, that is all, and there is nothing wrong in it. As for the result, in every field of activity, the expert defeats the tyro, and that is what happens in a game of dice also. But if you are afraid, you need not play, but do not come out with this worn excuse of right and wrong."

Yudhishthira replied: "Well, who is to play with me?"

Duryodhana said: "Mine is the responsibility for finding the stakes in the form of wealth and gems to play the game. My uncle Sakuni will actually cast the dice in my stead."

Yudhishthira had thought himself secure of defeating Duryodhana in play but Sakuni was a different matter, for Sakuni was a recognised expert. So he hesitated and said: "It is not, I think, customary for one man to play on behalf of another."

Sakuni retorted tauntingly: "I see that you are forging another excuse."

Yudhishthira flushed and, casting caution to the winds, replied: "Well, I shall play."

The hall was fully crowded. Drona, Kripa, Bhishma, Vidura and Dhritarashtra were seated there. They knew that the game would end viciously and sat unhappily witnessing what they could not prevent. The assembled princes watched the game with great interest and enthusiasm.

At first they wagered jewels and later gold, silver and then chariots and horses. Yudhishthira lost continually. When he lost all these, Yudhishthira staked his servants and lost them also. He pledged his elephants and armies and lost them too. The dice thrown by Sakuni seemed at every time to obey his will.

Cows, sheep, cities, villages and citizens and all other possessions were lost by Yudhishthira. Still, drugged with misfortune, he would not stop. He lost the ornaments of his brothers and himself as well as the very clothes they wore. Still ill-luck dogged him, or rather the trickery of Sakuni was too much for him.

Sakuni asked: "Is there anything else that you can offer as wager?"

Yudhishthira said: "Here is the beautiful sky-complexioned Nakula. He is one of my riches. I place him as a wager."

Sakuni replied: "Is it so? We shall be glad to win your beloved prince." With these words Sakuni cast the dice and the result was what he had foretold.

The assembly trembled.

Yudhishthira said: "Here is my brother Sahadeva. He is famous for his infinite knowledge in all the arts. It is wrong to bet him, still I do so. Let us play."

Sakuni cast the dice with the words: "Here, I have played and I have won." Yudhishthira lost Sahadeva too.

The wicked Sakuni was afraid that Yudhishthira might stop there. So he lashed Yudhishthira with these words:

"To you, Bhima and Arjuna, being your full brothers, are no doubt dearer than the sons of Madri. You will not offer them, I know."

Yudhishthira, now thoroughly reckless and stung to the quick by the sneering imputation that he held his step-brothers cheap, replied: "Fool, do you seek to divide us? How can you, living an evil life, understand the righteous life we lead?"

He continued: "I offer as wager the ever-victorious Arjuna who successfully voyages across oceans of battle. Let us play."

Sakuni answered: "I cast the dice" and he played. Yudhishthira lost Arjuna also.

The stubborn madness of unbroken misfortune carried

Yudhishthira further and deeper. With tears in his eyes, he said: "O king, Bhima, my brother, is our leader in battle; he strikes terror into the heart of demons and is equal to Indra; he can never suffer the least dishonour and he is peerless throughout the world in physical strength. I offer him as a bet" and he played again and lost Bhima too.

The wicked Sakuni asked: "Is there anything else you can offer?"

Dharmaputra replied: "Yes. Here is myself. If you win, I shall be your slave."

"Look. I win." Thus saying, Sakuni cast the dice and won. After that Sakuni stood up in the assembly and shouted the names of each of the five Pandavas and loudly proclaimed that they had all become his lawful slaves.

The assembly looked on in stunned silence. Sakuni alone turned to Yudhishthira and said: "There is one jewel still in your possession by staking which you can yet free yourself. Can you not continue the game offering your wife Draupadi as wager?"

Yudhishthira despairingly said: "I pledge her," and he trembled unwittingly.

There was audible distress and agitation in that part of the assembly where the elders sat. Soon great shouts of 'Fie! Fie!' arose from all sides. The more emotional wept. Others perspired, and felt the end of the world was come.

Duryodhana, his brothers and Karna shouted with exultation. In that group Yuyutsu alone bent his head in shame and sorrow and heaved a deep sigh. Sakuni cast the dice and shouted again: "I have won."

At once Duryodhana turned to Vidura and said: "Go and fetch Draupadi, the beloved wife of the Pandavas. She must henceforward sweep and clean our house. Let her come without delay."

Vidura exclaimed: "Are you mad that you rush to certain destruction? You are hanging by a slender thread over a bottomless abyss! Drunk with success, you do not see it, but it will engulf you!" Having thus reprimanded Duryodhana, Vidura turned to the assembly and said: "Yudhishthira had no right to stake Panchali as by then he had himself already lost his freedom and lost all rights. I see that the ruin of the Kauravas is imminent, and that, regardless of the advice of their friends and well-wishers, the sons of Dhritarashtra are on the path to hell."

Duryodhana was angry at these words of Vidura and told Prathikami, his charioteer: "Vidura is jealous of us and he is afraid of the Pandavas. But you are different. Go forth and bring Draupadi immediately."

CHAPTER XXV

DRAUPADI'S GRIEF

PRATHIKAMI went to Draupadi as ordered by his master. He said to her: "O revered princess, Yudhishthira fell under the spell of the game of dice and has wagered and lost even you. Now you belong to Duryodhana. I have come by Duryodhana's command to take you to serve in his household as maid-servant, which will hereafter be your office."

Draupadi, the spouse of the emperor who had performed Rajasuya, was dumbfounded, at this strange message. She asked: "Prathikami, what do you say? Which prince would pledge his wife? Had he nothing else to pawn?"

Prathikami answered: "It is because he had already lost all other possessions and had nothing else left that he played offering you as a stake." Then he told her the whole story of how Yudhishthira had lost all his wealth and had finally betted her, after having first forfeited his brothers and himself.

Though the news was such as to break the heart and kill the soul, still, Draupadi soon regained her fortitude and, with anger blazing from her eyes, said: "O charioteer, return. Ask of him who played the game whether in it he first lost himself, or his wife. Ask this question in the open assembly; bring me his answer and then you can take me."

Prathikami went to the assembly and, turning to Yudhishthira, asked of him the question put by Draupadi.

Yudhishthira remained speechless.

Then Duryodhana bade Prathikami bring Panchali herself there to question her husband.

Prathikami went again to Draupadi and humbly said: "Princess, the mean-minded Duryodhana desires you to go to the assembly and ask your question yourself."

Draupadi answered: "No. Return to the assembly and put the question and demand an answer."

Prathikami did so.

Enraged, Duryodhana turned to his brother Duhsasana and said: "This man is a fool and is afraid of Bhima. Go and fetch Draupadi even if you have to drag her here."

Thus commanded, the wicked Duhsasana at once sped with joy on his errand. He proceeded to the place where Draupadi was, shouting: "Come, why do you delay? You are now ours. Be not shy, beautiful lady. Make yourself agreeable to us, now that you have been won by us. Come to the assembly" and in his impatience, he bade as though to take her thither by force.

Pânchali rose trembling, heart-stricken with sorrow and started to fly for refuge to the inner apartments of Dhritarashtra's queen. Duhsasana darted after her, caught her by the hair and dragged her to the assembly.

It is with a shudder of repugnance that we relate how the sons of Dhritarashtra stooped to commit this vilest of deeds.

As soon as she came to the assembly, Draupadi controlled her anguish and appealed to the elders gathered there:

"How could you consent to my being staked by the king who was himself trapped into the game and cheated by wicked persons, expert in the art? Since he was no longer a free man, how could he stake anything at all?" Then, stretching out her arms and raising her flowing eyes in agonised supplication she cried in a voice broken with sobs:

"If you have loved and revered the mothers who bore you and gave you suck, if the honour of wife or sister or daughter has been dear to you, if you believe in God and dharma, forsake me not in this horror more cruel than death!"

At this heart-broken cry—as of a poor fawn stricken to death—the elders hung their heads in grief and shame. Bhima could hold himself no longer. His swelling heart found relief in a roar of wrath which shook the very walls, and turning to Yudhishthira he said bitterly:

"Even abandoned professional gamblers would not stake the harlots who live with them, and you, worse than they, have left the daughter of Drupada to the mercy of these ruffians. I cannot bear this injustice. You are the cause of this great crime. Brother Sahadeva, bring fire. I am going to set fire to those hands of his which cast the dice."

Arjuna however remonstrated gently with Bhima: "You have never before spoken thus. The plot devised by our enemies is entangling us also in its meshes and inciting us to wicked action. We should not succumb and play their game. Beware."

With a superhuman effort, Bhima controlled his anger.

Vikarna, the son of Dhritarashtra, could not bear the sight of the agony of Panchali. He rose up and said: "O kshatriya heroes, why are you silent? I am a mere youth, I know, but your silence compels me to speak. Listen. Yudhishthira was enticed to this game by a deeply plotted invitation and he pledged this lady when he had no right to do so, because she does not belong to Yudhishthira alone. For that reason alone the wager is illegal. Besides, Yudhishthira had already lost his freedom, and being no longer a free man, how could he have a right to offer her as a stake? And there is this further objection. It was Sakuni who suggested her as a pledge, which is against the rules of the game, under which neither player may demand a specific bet. If we consider all these points, we must admit that Panchali has not been legally won by us. This is my opinion."

When the young Vikarna spoke thus courageously, the wisdom given by God to the members of the assembly suddenly illumined their minds. There were great shouts of applause. They shouted: "Dharma has been saved. Dharma has been saved."

At that moment Karna rose up and said:

"O Vikarna, forgetting that there are elders in this assembly, you lay down the law though you are but a stripling. By your ignorance and rashness you are injuring the very family which gave you birth, just as the flame generated by the arani destroys its source, the stick. It is an ill bird that fouls its own nest. At the very beginning, when Yudhishthira was a free man, he forfeited all he possessed and that, of course, included Draupadi. Hence, Draupadi had already come into Sakuni's possession. There is nothing more to be said in the matter. Even the clothes they have on are now Sakuni's property. O Duhsasana, seize the garments of the Pandavas and the robes of Draupadi and hand them over to Sakuni."

As soon as they heard the cruel words of Karna, the Pandavas, feeling that they had to stand the test of dharma to the bitter end, flung off their upper garments to show that they were ready to follow the path of honour and right at any cost.

Seeing this, Duhsasana went to Draupadi and made ready to seize her clothes by force. All earthly aid had failed, and in the anguish of utter helplessness, she implored divine mercy and succour: "O Lord of the World," she wailed, "God whom I adore and trust, abandon me not in this dire plight. You are my sole refuge. Protect me." And she fainted away. Then, as the wicked Duhsasana started his shameful work of pulling at Panchali's robes, and good men shuddered and averted their eyes, even then, in the mercy of God a miracle occurred. In vain Duhsasana toiled to strip off her garments, for as he pulled off each, ever fresh garments were seen to clothe her body, and soon a great heap of resplendent clothes was piled up before the assembly till Duhsasana desisted and sat down in sheer fatigue. The assembly trembled at this marvel and good men praised God and wept.

Bhima with quivering lips, loudly uttered this terrible oath: "May I never go to the blest abode of my ancestors if I do not rend the breast and drink the heart's blood of this sinful Duhsasana, this shame of the Bharata race."

Suddenly, the howling of jackals could be heard. Donkeys and carnivorous birds began to send forth weird dissonant cries from all sides, portending calamities to come.

Dhritarashtra who realised that this incident would be the cause of the destruction of his race for once, acted with wisdom and courage. He called Draupadi to his side and attempted to soothe her with words of gentleness and affection. Then he turned to Yudhishthira and said: "You are so blameless that you can have no enemies. Forgive in your magnanimity the evil done by Duryodhana and dismiss all memory of it from your mind. Take back your kingdom and riches and everything else and be free and prosperous. Return to Indraprastha." And the Pandavas left that accursed hall, bewildered and stunned, and seeing a miracle in this sudden release from calamity. But it was too good to endure.

After Yudhishthira and his brothers had departed, there was a long and angry discussion in the palace of the Kauravas. Incited by Duhsasana, Sakuni and others, Duryodhana upbraided his father with having frustrated their well-laid plans on the very threshold of success. He quoted Brihaspati's aphorism that no device could be considered wrong which had as its object the destruction of formidable enemies. He dilated on the prowess of the Pandavas and expressed his conviction that the only hope of overcoming the Pandavas lay in guile and taking advantage of their pride and sense of honour. No self-respecting kshatriya could decline an invitation to a game of dice. Duryodhana secured his doting father's reluctant and bodeful approval to a plan to entice Yudhishthira once again to a game of dice.

A messenger was accordingly despatched after Yudhisthira who had taken his departure for Indraprastha. He came up with Yudhishthira before the latter had reached his destination and invited him on behalf of king Dhritarashtra to come back. On hearing this invitation, Yudhishthira said: "Good and evil come from destiny and cannot be avoided. If we *must* play again —we must, that is all. A challenge to dice cannot in honour be refused. I must accept it." Truly, as Sri Vyasa says: "There never was and never can be an antelope of gold! Yet, Rama went in vain pursuit of what seemed one; surely, when calamities are imminent, the judgment is first destroyed."

Dharmaputra returned to Hastinapura and set again for a game with Sakuni, though everyone in the assembly tried to dissuade him. He seemed a mere pawn moved by Kali to relieve the burden of the world. The stake played for was that the defeated party should go with his brothers into exile to the forest and remain there for twelve years and spend the thirteenth year incognito; if they were recognised in the thirteenth year, they should go again into exile for twelve years. Needless to say, Yudhishthira met with defeat on this occasion also, and the Pandavas took the vows of those who are to go to the forest. All the members of the assembly bent down their heads in shame.

CHAPTER XXVI

DHRITARASHTRA'S ANXIETY

WHEN the Pandavas set out for the forest, there arose a great clamour of lamentation from people who thronged the streets and climbed the roofs and towers and trees to see them go. The princes, who, of yore, rode in jewelled chariots or on lordly elephants to strains of auspicious music, now walked away from their birthright on weary feet, accompanied by weeping crowds. On all sides cries arose of "*Fie and Alas! Does not God see this from His heaven*?"

The blind Dhritarashtra sent for Vidura and asked him to describe the departure of the Pandavas into exile.

Vidura replied: "Yudhishthira, the son of Kunti, went with his face covered with a cloth. Bhima went behind with his eyes lowered on his arms. Arjuna proceeded scattering sand on his path. Nakula and Sahadeva besmeared their bodies with dust and closely followed Yudhishthira. Draupadi accompanied Dharmaputra, her dishevelled hair covering her face and her eyes streaming with tears. Dhaumya, the priest, went along with them singing the Sama hymns, addressed to Yama, the Lord of Death."

When he heard these words, Dhritarashtra was filled with ever greater fear and anxiety than before. He asked: "What do the citizens say?"

Vidura answered: "O great king, I shall tell you in their own words what the citizens of all castes and creeds say: 'Our leaders have left us. Fie on the elders of the Kuru race who have suffered such things to happen! The covetous Dhritarashtra and his sons have driven away the sons of Pandu to the forest.' While the citizens blame us thus, the heavens are vexed with cloudless lightning, and the distressed earth quakes, and there are other evil portents."

While Dhritarashtra and Vidura were conversing thus, the sage Narada suddenly appeared before them and declared: "Fourteen years from this day the Kauravas will become extinct as the result of the crime committed by Duryodhana" and vanished from sight.

Duryodhana and his companions were filled with fear and approached Drona with a prayer never to abandon them, whatever happened.

Drona answered gravely: "I believe with the wise that the Pandavas are of divine birth and unconquerable; yet my duty is to fight for the sons of Dhritarashtra who rely on me and whose salt I eat. I shall strive for them, heart and soul, but destiny is all-powerful. The Pandavas will surely return from exile, burning with anger. I should know what anger is, for I dethroned and dishonoured Drupada on account of my anger towards him. Implacably revengeful, he has performed a sacrifice so that he might be blessed with a son who would kill me and it is said Dhrishtadyumna is that son. As destiny would have it, he is the brother-in-law and fast friend of the Pandavas, and things are moving as foreordained. Your actions tend in the same direction, and your days are numbered. Lose no time in doing good while you may; perform great sacrifice, enjoy sinless pleasures, give alms to the needy. Nemesis will overtake you in the fourteenth year. Duryodhana, make peace with Yudhishthira —this is my counsel to you—but, of course, you will do what you like."

Duryodhana was not at all pleased with these words of Drona.

Sanjaya asked Dhritarashtra: "O king, why are you worried?"

The blind king replied: "How can I know peace after having injured the Pandavas?"

Sanjaya said: "What you say is quite true. The victim of adverse fate will first become perverted, utterly losing his sense of right and wrong. Time, the all destroyer, does not take a club and break the head of a man but by destroying his judgment, makes him act madly to his own ruin. Your sons have grossly insulted Panchali and put themselves on the path of destruction."

Dhritarashtra said: "I did not follow the wise path of dharma and statesmanship but suffered myself to be misled by my foolish son and, as you say, we are fast hastening towards the abyss."

Vidura used to advise Dhritarashtra earnestly. He would often tell him: "Your son has committed a great wrong. Dharmaputra has been cheated. Was it not your duty to turn your children to the path of virtue and pull them away from vice? You should order even now that the Pandavas get back the kingdom granted to them by you. Recall Yudhishthira from the forest and make peace with him. You should even restrain Duryodhana by force if he will not listen to reason."

At first Dhritarashtra would listen in sad silence when Vidura spoke thus, for he knew Vidura to be a wiser man than himself who wished him well, but gradually his patience wore thin with repeated homilies.

One day, Dhritarashtra could stand it no longer. "O Vidura," he burst out, "you are always speaking for the Pandavas and against my sons. You do not seek our good. Duryodhana was born of my loins. How can I give him up? What is the use of advising such an unnatural course? I have lost my faith in you and do not need you any more. You are free to go to the Pandavas if you like." Then, turning his back on Vidura, he retired to the inner apartments.

Vidura sorrowfully felt that the destruction of the Kuru race was certain and, taking Dhritarashtra at his word, drove in a chariot with fleet horses to the forest where the Pandavas lived.

Dhritarashtra was filled with anxious remorse. He reflected within himself: "What have I done? I have only strengthened the Pandavas still further by driving the wise Vidura into their arms." Pondering thus, he sent for Sanjaya and asked him to bear a repentant message to Vidura imploring him to forgive the thoughtless words of an unhappy father and to return.

Sanjaya hurried to the hermitage where the Pandavas were staying and found them clad in deer-skin and surrounded by sages. He also saw Vidura there and conveyed Dhritarashtra's message adding that the blind king would die broken-hearted if he did not return.

The soft-hearted Vidura, who was dharma incarnate, was greatly moved and returned to Hastinapura.

Dhritarashtra embraced Vidura and the difference between them was washed away in tears of mutual affection.

One day, the sage Maitreya came to the court of Dhritarashtra and was welcomed with great respect.

Dhritarashtra craved his blessing and asked him: "Revered sir, you have certainly met my beloved children, the Pandavas, in Kurujangala. Are they well? Will mutual affection abide in our family without any diminution?"

Maitreya said: "I accidentally met Yudhishthira in the Kamyaka forest. The sages of the place had come to see him. I learnt of the events that took place in Hastinapura, and I marvelled that such things should have been permitted while Bhishma and yourself were alive."

Later, Maitreya saw Duryodhana who was also in the court and advised him, for his own good, not to injure but to make peace with the Pandavas who were not only mighty themselves but related to Krishna and Drupada.

The obstinate and foolish Duryodhana merely laughed, slapping his thighs in derision and, tearing the ground with his feet and without deigning an answer, turned away.

Maitreya grew angry and looking at Duryodhana said: "Are you so arrogant and do you slap your thighs in derision of one who wishes you well? Your thighs will be broken by Bhima's mace and you will die on the battlefield." At this Dhritarashtra jumped up, fell at the feet of the sage and begged forgiveness.

Maitreya said: "My curse will not work if your son makes peace with the Pandavas. Otherwise it will have effect," and strode indignantly out of the assembly.

The Mahabharata is an ancient story but human nature remains the same. Even at the present day, anger and hatred afflict and threaten with ruin poor human beings without regard to age or sex or condition. If we read this chapter and ponder on it when we are inclined to be angry, it may make us wise and save us from foolishness and crime.

CHAPTER XXVII

KRISHNA'S VOW

As soon as the news of the slaying of Sisupala by Krishna reached his friend Salva, he became very angry and besieged Dwaraka with a mighty force. Krishna having not yet returned to Dwaraka, old Ugrasena was in charge of the defence of the city. The sieges described in the Mahabharata seem very much like those in wars of the present day. Dwaraka was a strongly garrisoned fortress built on an island and well provided with means of defence. Ample barracks had been provided and there was an abundant supply of food and weapons and the garrison included many illustrious warriors. Ugrasena imposed a stringent ban upon drinking and amusements generally for the period of the siege. All the bridges were demolished and ships were forbidden entry into ports in the realm. Iron spikes were planted in the moats around the fortress and the city walls kept in good repair. All entrances to the city were guarded with barbed wire and ingress and egress were strictly controlled by permits and passwords. Thus no arrangements were neglected that could further strengthen the city which nature had already made impregnable. The pay of the soldiers was increased. Volunteers for service were rigidly tested before being accepted as soldiers.

The siege was so rigorously pushed that the garrison suffered great privations. Krishna, when he returned, was struck to the heart at the sufferings of his beloved city and he compelled Salva immediately to raise the siege, by attacking and defeating him. It was only afterwards that Krishna learnt for the first time of the events at Hastinapura, the game of dice and the exile of the Pandavas. At once he set out for the forest where the Pandavas were living.

Along with Krishna went many including men of the Bhoja and Vrishni tribes, Dhrishtaketu, the king of the Chedi country, and the Kekayas who were all devoted to the Pandavas.

They were filled with righteous indignation when they heard of Duryodhana's perfidy and cried out that surely the earth would drink the blood of such wicked people. Draupadi approached Sri Krishna and, in a voice drowned in tears and broken with sobs, told the story of her wrongs.

She said: "I was dragged to the assembly when I had but a single garment on my body. The sons of Dhritarashtra insulted me most outrageously and gloated over my agony. They thought that I had become their slave and accosted me and treated me as one. Even Bhishma and Dhritarashtra forgot my birth and breeding and my relationship to them. O Janardhana, even my husbands did not protect me from the jeers and the ribald insults of those foul ruffians. Bhima's bodily strength and Arjuna's Gandiva were alike of no avail. Under such supreme provocation even weaklings would have found strength and courage to strike the vile insulter dead. The Pandavas are renowned heroes and yet Duryodhana lives! I, the daughter-in-law of the emperor Pandu, was dragged by my hair. I, the wife of five heroes, was dishonoured. O Madhusudana, even you had deserted me." She stood trembling, utterly unable to continue, for the grief convulsed her.

Krishna was deeply moved and he consoled the weeping Draupadi. He said: "Those who tormented you will be stricken to death in the bloody quagmire of a lost battle. Wipe your eyes. I solemnly promise that your grievous wrongs shall be amply avenged. I shall help the Pandavas in every way. You will become an empress. The heavens may fall, the Himalayas may split in twain, the earth may crumble or the boundless sea may dry up—but, I tell you verily, my words shall stand. I swear this," and Krishna took a solemn vow before Draupadi. This vow, it will be seen, was in perfect accord with the purpose of the Lord's avatars, as declared in scriptures: "For protecting the righteous, for destroying the wicked and for firmly upholding the law, I am born on earth age after age."

Dhrishtadyumna also consoled his sister and told her how nemesis would overtake the Kauravas. He said: "I will kill Drona, Sikhandin will cause Bhishma's fall. Bhima will take the lives of the wicked Duryodhana and his brothers. Arjuna will slay Karna, the charioteer's son."

Sri Krishna said: "When this calamity befell you, I was not in Dwaraka. Had I been there, I would never have allowed this fraudulent game of dice to take place. Uninvited, I would have gone there and stirred up Drona, Kripa and the other elders to a sense of duty. I would, at all costs, have prevented this destructive play of dice. When Sakuni was cheating you, I was fighting King Salva who had besieged my city. It was only after I had defeated him that I came to know of the game of dice and the subsequent sordid story. It grieves me that I am not able to remove your sorrows immediately but you know, some water must be lost before a broken dam is restored."

Then Krishna took leave and returned to Dwaraka with Subhadra, the wife of Arjuna, and their child, Abhimanyu. Dhrishtadyumna went back to Panchala taking with him the sons of Draupadi.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PASUPATA

In the beginning of their stay in the forest, Bhima and Draupadi used, on occasions, to argue with Yudhishthira. They would plead that only righteous anger befitted a kshatriya and that patience and forbearance under slights and insults were not worthy of him. They would quote weighty authorities and argue vehemently in support of their contention. Yudhishthira would firmly reply that they should abide by the promise they had made and that forbearance was the highest virtue of all. Bhima was burning with impatience to attack and kill Duryodhana immediately and win back the kingdom. He thought it unworthy of warriors to continue to dwell tamely in the forest.

Bhima said to Yudhishthira: "You speak like those who repeat Vedic mantras and are satisfied with the sound of the words though ignorant of their meaning. Your intellect has become confused. You are born as a kshatriya and yet you do not think or behave like one. You have become a brahmana by temperament. You know, the scriptures enjoin on a kshatriya sternness and enterprise. We should not let the wicked sons of Dhritarashtra have their way. Vain is the birth of a kshatriya who does not conquer his deceitful enemies. This is my opinion, and to me, if we go to hell by killing a deceitful foe, such hell is heaven. Your forbearance burns us worse than fire. It scorches Arjuna and myself day and night, making us sleepless. Those miscreants have seized our kingdom by fraud and are enjoying it, while you lie torpid like a gorged python. You say that we should abide by our promise. How can the world-renowned Arjuna live incognito? Can the Himalayas be hidden under a handful of grass? How can the lion-hearted Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva live in hiding? Can the famous Draupadi walk about unrecognised by others? Even if we do these impossible things, the son of Dhritarashtra will find out through his spies. Hence, this promise of ours is impossible of performance and has been put on us merely to thrust us out again for another thirteen years. The sastras too support me when I say that a filched promise is no promise. A handful of grass thrown to a tired bull ought to be enough as expiation for breaking such a promise. You should resolve to kill our enemies immediately. There is no higher duty for a kshatriya."

Bhima was never tired of pressing his view. Draupadi also would refer to the dishonour she had suffered at the hands of Duryodhana, Karna and Duhsasana and would quote authorities from the scriptures that would give Yudhishthira anxiety to think. He would sometimes answer with trite maxims of politics and refer to the relative strength of the parties.

He would say: "Our enemy has such adherents as Bhurisravas, Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Aswatthama. Duryodhana and his brothers are expert in warfare. Many feudatory princes, as well as mighty monarchs, are now on their side. Bhishma and Drona, indeed, have no respect for Duryodhana's character, but will not give him up and are prepared to sacrifice their lives on his side in the battlefield. Karna is a brave and skilful fighter, well versed in the use of all the weapons. The course of war is unpredictable and success is uncertain. There is no use in being hasty." Thus Yudhishthira managed with difficulty to restrain the impatience of the younger Pandavas.

Later, as advised by Vyasa, Arjuna went to the Himalayas to practise austerities for the purpose of getting new weapons from the devas. Arjuna took leave of his brothers and went to Panchali to bid her farewell. She said: "O Dhananjaya, may you prosper in your mission. May God give you all that Kuntidevi hoped and wished for when you were born. The happiness, life, honour and prosperity of us all depend on you.

Return after acquiring new weapons." Thus Panchali sent him forth with auspicious words.

It is noteworthy that though the voice was Draupadi the wife's, yet the benediction was Kunti the mother's for the words were: "May God give all that Kuntidevi wished and hoped for when you were born."

Arjuna passed through dense forests and reached the mountain of Indrakila, where he met an old brahmana. The ascetic smiled and spoke affectionately to Arjuna: "Child, you are clad in armour and carry weapons. Who are you? Weapons are of no use here. What do you seek in this garb of a kshatriya in this abode of ascetics and saints who have conquered anger and passion?" That was Indra, the king of gods, who came to have the pleasure of meeting his son.

Arjuna bowed to his father and said: "I seek arms; bless me with weapons."

Indra replied: "O Dhananjaya, what is the use of weapons? Ask for pleasures or seek to go to higher worlds for enjoyment."

Arjuna answered: "O king of gods, I do not seek pleasures of higher worlds. I have come here after leaving Panchali and my brothers in the forest. I seek but weapons."

The thousand-eyed said: "If you be blessed by the vision of god Siva, the three-eyed god, and obtain his grace, you will receive divine weapons. Do penance unto Siva." Thus saying Indra disappeared. Then, Arjuna went to the Himalayas and did penance to obtain the grace of Siva.

Siva under the guise of a hunter and accompanied by his divine spouse Umadevi, entered the forest in pursuit of game. The chase grew fast and furious, and presently a wild boar started charging Arjuna, who shot an arrow into it with his Gandiva at the same moment that the hunter Siva transfixed it with a shaft from Pinaka, his bow.

Arjuna shouted in loud voice: "Who are you? Why are you ranging in this forest with your wife? How dare you shoot at the game I had aimed at?"

The hunter replied as though in contempt: "This forest, full of game, belongs to us, who live in it. You do not look tough enough to be a forester; your limbs and bearing bespeak a soft luxurious life. It is rather for me to ask what you are doing here." He also added that it was his shaft that had killed the boar and that, if Arjuna thought differently, he was welcome to fight about it.

Nothing could please Arjuna better. He jumped up and showered snake-like arrows at Siva. To his amazement, they seemed to have no effect on the hunter and fell back hurtless like storm-driven rain from a mountain peak. When he had no more arrows, he started to strike Siva with his bow, but the hunter seemed not to heed it and wrenched with ease the bow out of Arjuna's hand and burst into laughter. Arjuna, who had been disarmed with humiliating ease by one who seemed an ordinary hunter of the forest, was struck with amazement, almost amounting to doubt, but nothing daunted, he drew his sword and continued the combat. The sword was shivered to pieces on the hunter's adamantine frame. There was now nothing to do but to grapple with the formidable unknown; but here again he was outmatched. The hunter caught him in an iron clasp so close that Arjuna was quite helpless.

Worsted and overmastered, Arjuna humbly sought divine aid and meditated on Siva, and as he did so, a light broke on his troubled mind, and at once he knew who the hunter really was.

He fell at the feet of the Lord and, in a broken voice of repentance and adoration, he prayed for forgiveness. "I forgive you," said Siva smilingly and gave him back Gandiva, as well as the other weapons, of which he had been deprived. He also bestowed on Arjuna the marvellous Pasupata weapon.

Arjuna's body, battered in the unequal combat, was made whole and perfect by the divine touch of the three-eyed god and became a hundredfold stronger and more brilliant than before. "Go to heaven and render dutiful respect to your father Indra," said Siva and vanished from view like the setting son.

Arjuna was overcome with joy and exclaimed: "Have I really seen the Lord face to face and have I been blessed with his divine touch? What more do I need?" At that moment, Matali, the charioteer of Indra, came there with his chariot and took Arjuna to the kingdom of the gods.

CHAPTER XXIX

AFFLICTION IS NOTHING NEW

BALARAMA and Krishna came with their retinue to the abode of the Pandavas in the forest. Deeply distressed by what he saw, Balarama said to Krishna:

"O Krishna, it would seem that virtue and wickedness bear contrary fruit in this life, for see, the wicked Duryodhana is ruling his kingdom clad in silk and gold, while the virtuous Yudhishthira lives in the forest, wearing the bark of trees. Seeing such unmerited prosperity and undeserved privation, men have lost their faith in God. The praise of virtue in the sastras seems mere mummery when we see the actual results of good and evil in this world. How will Dhritarashtra justify his conduct and defend himself when he is face to face with the god of death? Even the mountains and the earth weep at the sight of the blameless Pandavas dwelling in the forests with the blessed Draupadi, born from the sacrificial fire."

Satyaki, who was seated near, said: "O Balarama, this is no time for lamenting. Should we wait till Yudhishthira asks us to do our duty by the Pandavas? While you and Krishna and all other relations are living, why should the Pandavas waste their precious years in the forest? Let us collect our forces and attack Duryodhana. With the army of the Vrishnis, we are surely strong enough to destroy the Kauravas. Why, where is the need to foil Karna's vaunted archery and cut off his head. Let us kill Duryodhana and his adherents in the battlefield and hand over the kingdom to Abhimanyu if the Pandavas wish to keep their word and stay in the forest. This is good for them and befits us as men of valour."

Vasudeva, who was listening carefully to this speech, said: "What you say is true. But the Pandavas would not like to receive from the hands of others what they have not won by their own efforts. Draupadi for one, born of a heroic race as she is, would not hear of it. Yudhishthira will never give up the path of righteousness for love or fear. When the stipulated period of exile is over the kings of Panchala, Kekaya and Chedi and ourselves will unite our forces to help the Pandavas to conquer their enemies."

Yudhishthira was delighted at these words of Krishna.

"Sri Krishna knows my mind," said he. "Truth is greater than power or prosperity and has to be guarded at all costs, and not the kingdom. When he wants us to fight, he shall find us ready. The heroes of the Vrishni race may now return with the certainty that we shall meet again when the time is ripe." With these words Yudhishthira gave them leave to return.

Arjuna was still away in the Himalayas and Bhima's anxiety and impatience became well-nigh insupportable. He said to

Yudhishthira:

"You know that our life depends on Arjuna. He has been very long away, and we have had no tidings of him. If he should be lost to us, then neither the king of Panchala, nor Satyaki nor even Sri Krishna can save us, and I for one cannot survive that loss. All this we owe to that mad game of dice—our sorrows and sufferings, as well as the growing strength of our foes. To be dwelling in the forest is not the duty enjoined on a kshatriya. We should immediately recall Arjuna and wage war with the sons of Dhritarashtra, with the help of Sri Krishna. I shall be satisfied only when the wicked Sakuni, Karna and Duryodhana are slain. After this clear duty is done, you may, if you like, return to the forest and live a life of asceticism. It is not a sin to kill by stratagem an enemy who has resorted to stratagem. I have heard that the Atharvana Veda has incantations which can compress time and reduce its span. If we could, by such means, squeeze thirteen years into thirteen days, we would be perfectly justified in doing so; and you will permit me on the fourteenth day to kill Duryodhana."

Hearing these words of Bhima, Dharmaputra affectionately embraced him and sought to restrain his impetuosity. "Beloved brother, as soon as the period of thirteen years is over, Arjuna, the hero, with the Gandiva, and yourself will fight and kill Duryodhana. Be patient till then. Duryodhana and his followers, who are sunk in sin, cannot escape. Be assured of it."

While the sorrow-stricken brothers were thus engaged in debate, the great sage Brihadaswa came to the hermitage of the Pandavas and was received with the customary honours. After a while, Yudhishthira said to him:

"Revered sage, our deceitful enemies drew us into this game of dice and cheated us of our kingdom and riches, and drove my heroic brothers, as well as Panchali and myself, to the forest. Arjuna, who left us a long time ago to get divine weapons, has not returned as yet and we miss him sorely. Will he return with divine arms? And when will he be back? Surely, never was there in this world a man who suffered so much sorrow as myself."

The great sage replied: "Do not let your mind dwell on sorrow. Arjuna will return with divine weapons and you will conquer your enemies in the fitness of time. You say that there is no one in this world who is as unfortunate as you. Now, that is not true, though everyone, tried by adversity, is inclined to claim pre-eminence in sorrow, because things felt are more than things heard or seen. Have you heard of king Nala of Nishadha? He suffered more sorrows than yourself even in the forest. He was deceived by Pushkara at a game of dice; he lost his wealth and kingdom and had to go in exile to the forest. Less fortunate than you, he had not with him his brothers or brahmanas. The influence of Kali, the spirit of the dark age, deprived him of his discrimination and good sense and, not knowing what he was doing, he deserted his wife who had accompanied him, and wandered about in the forest, solitary and almost mad. Now, compare your state with his. You have the company of your heroic brothers and devoted wife and are supported by a few learned brahmanas in your adversity. Your mind is sound and steady. Self-pity is natural, but you are really not so badly off."

The sage then narrated the life of Nala which constitutes twenty-eight chapters of the great epic. The sage concluded with these words:

"O Pandava, Nala was tried by sorrows more agonising than yours, yet he triumphed over them all and his life ended happily. You have the alleviations of unclouded intellect and the society of your nearest and dearest. You spend much of your time in exalted contemplation of dharma and in holy converse with brahmanas who are learned in the Vedas and Vedantas. Bear your trials and tribulations with fortitude, for they are the lot of man and not peculiar to you."

Thus did the sage Brihadaswa console Yudhishthira.

CHAPTER XXX

AGASTYA

THE brahmanas, who had been with Yudhishthira in Indraprastha, had followed him to the forest. It was difficult to maintain such a large establishment. Some time after Arjuna had gone on his quest of Pasupata, a brahmana sage named Lomasa came to the abode of the Pandavas. He advised Yudhishthira to minimise his retinue before going on pilgrimage as it would be difficult to move freely from place to place with a large following. Yudhishthira, who had long felt that difficulty, announced to his followers that such of them, as were unaccustomed to hardship and to hard and scanty fare and those who had followed merely in token of loyalty, might return to Dhritarashtra or, if they preferred it, go to Drupada, the King of Panchala.

Later, with a greatly reduced retinue, the Pandavas started on a pilgrimage to holy places, acquainting themselves with the stories and traditions relating to each. The story of Agastya was one such.

Agastya, it is said, once saw some ancestral spirits dangling head down and asked them who they were and how they had come to be in that unpleasant plight. They replied: "Dear child, we are your ancestors. If you discharge not your debt to us by marrying and begetting progeny, there will be no one after you to offer us oblations. We have, therefore, resorted to this austerity, in order to persuade you to save us from this peril."

When Agastya heard this, he decided to marry.

The king of the country of Vidarbha was childless and, so, careworn. He repaired to Agastya to get his blessing. In granting him the boon, Agastya announced that the king would be the father of a beautiful girl, who, he stipulated, should be given in marriage to him.

Soon the queen gave birth to a girl who was named Lopamudra. She grew with years into a maiden of such rare beauty and charm that she became celebrated in the kshatriya world; but no prince dared to woo her for fear of Agastya.

Later, the sage Agastya came to Vidarbha and demanded the hand of the king's daughter.

The king was reluctant to give the delicately nurtured princess in marriage to a sage leading the primitive life of a forester but he also feared the anger of the sage if he said nay, and was plunged in sorrow. Lopamudra, greatly concerned, discovered the cause of her parent's unhappiness and expressed her readiness—nay her desire—to marry the sage.

The king was relieved, and the marriage of Agastya and Lopamudra was celebrated in due course.

When the princess set out to accompany the sage, he bade her give up her costly garments and valuable jewels. Unquestioningly Lopamudra distributed her priceless jewels and garments amongst her companions and attendants, and covering herself in deer skin and garments of bark, she joyfully accompanied the sage.

During the time Lopamudra and Agastya spent in tapas and meditation at Gangadwara, a strong and abiding love sprang up between them. To conjugal life, Lopamudra's modesty shrank from the lack of privacy in a forest hermitage, and one day, with blushing and humbleness she expressed her mind to her husband.

She said: "My desire is that I may have the royal bedding, the beautiful robes and the valuable jewels I had when I was in my father's place and that you too may have splendid garments and ornaments. And then we shall enjoy life to our heart's content."

Agastya smilingly replied: "I have neither the wealth nor the facilities to provide what you want. Are we not beggars living in the forest?"

But Lopamudra knew her lord's yogic power, and said: "Lord, you are all-powerful by the strength of your austerities. You can get the wealth of the whole world in a moment if you but will."

Agastya said that no doubt that was so, but, if he spent his austerities in gaining things of such little moment as riches, they would soon dwindle to nothing.

She replied: "I do not wish that. What I desire is that you should earn in the ordinary way sufficient wealth for us to live in ease and comfort."

Agastya consented and set out as an ordinary brahmana to beg of various kings.

Agastya went to a king who was reputed to be very wealthy. The sage told the king: "I have come in quest of wealth. Give me what I seek, without causing any loss or injury to others."

The king presented a true picture of the income and expenditure of the State and told him he was free to take what he deemed fit. The sage found from the accounts that there was no balance left. The expenditure of a State turns out always to be at least equal to its income. This seems to have been the case in ancient times also.

Seeing this, Agastya said: "To accept any gift from this king, will be a hardship to the citizens. So, I shall seek elsewhere," and the sage was about to leave. The king said that he would also accompany him and both of them went to another State where also they found the same state of affairs.

Vyasa thus lays down and illustrates the maxim that a king should not tax his subjects more than necessary for rightful public expenditure and that if one accepts as gift anything from the public revenues, one adds to the burden of the subjects to that extent. Agastya thought he had better go to the wicked asura Ilvala and try his luck.

Ilvala and his brother Vatapi cherished an implacable hatred towards brahmanas. They had curious plan for killing them. Ilvala would, with effective hospitality, invite a brahmana to a feast. By the power of his magic he would transform his brother Vatapi into a goat and he would kill this pseudo-goat for food and serve its meat to the guest. In those days, the brahmanas used to eat meat.

The feast over, Ilvala would invoke his brother Vatapi to come out, for he had the art of bringing back to life those whom he had killed. And Vatapi, who as food had entered the vitals of the unlucky brahmana, would spring up sound and whole and rend his way out with fiendish laughter, of course killing the guest in doing so. In this manner, many brahmanas had died.

Ilvala was very happy when he learnt that Agastya was in the neighbourhood, since he felt that here was a good brahmana delivered into his hands. So, he welcomed him and prepared the usual feast. The sage ate heartily of Vatapi transformed into a goat, and it only remained for Ilvala to call out Vatapi for the rending scene. And, as usual, Ilvala repeated the magic formula and shouted: "Vatapi—come out!"

Agastya smiled and, gently rubbing his stomach, said: "O Vatapi, be digested in my stomach for the peace and good of the world."

Ilvala shouted again and again in frantic fear: "O Vatapi, come forth."

There was no response and the sage explained the reason. Vatapi had been digested. The trick had been tried once too often.

The asura bowed to Agastya and surrendered to him the riches he sought. Thus was the sage able to satisfy Lopamudra's desire.

Agastya asked her what she would prefer: whether ten ordinarily good sons or one super-good son with the strength of ten. Lopamudra replied she would like to have one exceptionally virtuous and learned son. The story goes that she was blessed with such a gifted son.

Once the Vindhyas became jealous of the Meru mountain and tried to grow in stature, obstructing the sun, the moon and the planets. Unable to prevent this danger, the gods sought aid from Agastya. The sage went to the Vindhya mountain and said:

"Best of mountains, stop your growing till I cross you on my way to the south and return north again. After my return, you can grow as you like. Wait till then."

Since the Vindhya mountain respected Agastya, it bowed to his request. Agastya did not return north at all, but settled in the south and so the Vindhyas remain arrested in growth to this day. Such is the story as narrated in the Mahabharata.

CHAPTER XXXI

RISHYASRINGA

It is an error to think that it is easy for a person to lead a life of chastity if he is brought up in complete ignorance of sensual pleasures. Virtue guarded only by ignorance is very insecure as illustrated by the following story. It is told in the Ramayana also, but not in the same detail.

Vibhandaka who was resplendent like Brahma, the Creator, lived with his son Rishyasringa in a forest. The latter had not come across any mortal, man or woman, except his father.

The country of Anga was once afflicted with a dire famine. Crops had withered for want of rain and men perished for lack of food. All living things were in distress. Romapada, the king of the country, approached the brahmanas to advise him of some means of saving the kingdom from famine. The brahmanas replied: "Best of kings, there is a young sage called Rishyasringa who lives a life of perfect chastity. Invite him to our kingdom. He has won the power, by his austerities, of bringing rain and plenty wherever he goes."

The king discussed with his courtiers the means by which Rishyasringa could be brought from the hermitage of the sage Vibhandaka. In accordance with their advice, he called together the most charming courtesans of the city and entrusted them with the mission of bringing Rishyasringa to Anga.

The damsels were in a quandary. On the one hand, they feared to disobey the king: on the other, they also feared the sage's wrath. Finally, they made up their minds to go, relying on Providence to help them, in achieving the good work of rescuing the stricken land from famine. They were suitably equipped for their enterprise before being sent to the hermitage.

The leader of this band of courtesans made a beautiful garden of a big boat, with artificial trees and creepers, with an imitation ashrama in the centre. She had the boat moored in the river near Vibhandaka's hermitage, and the courtesans visited the hermitage with quaking hearts.

Luckily for them, the sage was not at home. Feeling that this was the opportune moment, one of the beautiful damsels went to the sage's son.

She thus addressed Rishyasringa: "Great sage, are you well? Have you sufficient roots and fruits? Are the penances of the rishis of the forest proceeding satisfactorily? Is your father's glory constantly growing? Is your own study of the Vedas progressing?" This was how rishis used to accost one another in those days.

The youthful anchorite had never before seen such a beautiful human form or heard such a sweet voice. The instinctive yearning for society, especially of the opposite sex, though he had never seen a woman before, began to work on his mind from the moment he beheld that graceful form. He thought that she was a young sage like himself, and felt a strange irrepressible joy surging up in his soul. He answered, fixing eyes on his interlocutor:

"You seem to be a bright brahmacharin. Who are you? I bow to you. Where is your hermitage? What are the austerities you are practising?" and he rendered her the customary offerings.

She said to him: "At a distance of three yojanas from here is my ashrama. I have brought fruits for you. I am not fit to receive your prostration, but I shall return your greetings and salutation in the way customary with us."

She embraced him warmly, fed him with the sweets she had brought, decorated him with perfumed garlands, and served him with drinks. She embraced him again, saying that that was their way of salutation to honoured guests. He thought it a very agreeable way.

Shortly after, fearing the return of the sage Vibhandaka, the courtesan took her leave of Rishyasringa saying it was time for her to perform the agnihotra sacrifice and gently slipped out of the hermitage.

When Vibhandaka returned to the hermitage, he was shocked to see the place so untidy with sweetmeats scattered all over, for the hermitage had not been cleansed. The shrubs and creepers looked draggled and untidy. His son's face had not its usual lustre but seemed clouded and disturbed as by a storm of passion. The usual simple duties of the hermitage had been neglected.

Vibhandaka was troubled and asked his son: "Dear boy, why have you not yet gathered the sacred firewood? Who has broken these nice plants and shrubs? Has the cow been milked? Has anyone been here to serve you? Who gave you this strange garland? Why do you appear worried?"

The simple and ingenuous Rishyasringa replied: "A brahmacharin of wonderful form was here. I cannot describe his brightness and beauty or the sweetness of his voice. My inner being has been filled with indescribable happiness and affection by listening to his voice and looking at his eyes. When he embraced me—which it seems is his customary greeting—I experienced a joy which I have never felt before—no, not even when eating the sweetest fruits," and then he described to his father the form, beauty and the doings of his fair visitor.

Rishyasringa added wistfully: "My body seems to burn with desire for the company of that brahmacharin and I should like to go and find him and bring him here somehow. How can I give you any idea about his devotion and brightness? My heart pants to see him."

When Rishyasringa had thus brokenly expressed yearnings and disturbances to which he had hitherto been a stranger, Vibhandaka knew what had occurred. He said: "Child, this was no brahmacharin that you saw, but a malignant demon who sought, as demons do, to beguile us and hinder our penances and austerities. They take recourse to many kinds of tricks and stratagems for the purpose. Do not let them come near you." After that Vibhandaka searched in vain for three days in the forest to find out the wretches who had done this injury, and returned baffled in his purpose.

On another occasion, when Vibhandaka had gone out of the hermitage to bring roots and fruits, the courtesan again came softly to the place where Rishyasringa was seated. As soon as he saw her at a distance, Rishyasringa jumped up and ran to greet her gushingly, as pent up water surges out of a reservoir that has sprung a leak.

Even without waiting for prompting this time, Rishyasringa went near her and after the customary salutation said: "O shining brahmacharin, before my father returns let us go to your hermitage."

This was just what she had hoped and worked for, and together they entered the boat which had been made to look like a hermitage. As soon as the young sage had entered, the boat was freed from its moorings and floated easily down with its welcome freight to the kingdom of Anga. As might be expected, the young sage had a pleasant and interesting journey and when he reached Anga, he certainly knew more about the world and its ways than he had done in the forest.

The coming of Rishyasringa delighted Romapada infinitely and he took his welcome guest to the luxuriously provided inner apartments specially prepared for him. As foretold by the brahmanas, rain began to pour the instant Rishyasringa set his foot in the country, the rivers and the lakes were full and the people rejoiced. Romapada gave his daughter Santa in marriage to Rishyasringa.

Though all ended as he had planned, the king was uneasy in his mind, for he was afraid that Vibhandaka might come in search of his son and pronounce a curse on him. So, he sought to mollify Vibhandaka by lining the route he would take with cattle and kind and by instructing the cowherds in charge to say that they were Rishyasringa's servants and had come to welcome and honour their master's father and place themselves at his service.

Not finding his son anywhere in the hermitage, the enraged Vibhandaka thought that this might be the work of the king of Anga. He crossed intervening rivers and villages and marched to the capital of the king as if to burn him in his anger, but as at each stage of the journey he saw magnificent cattle which belonged to his son and was respectfully welcomed by his son's servants, his angry mood passed gradually as he approached the capital.

When he came to the capital, he was received with great honour and taken to the king's palace where he saw his son sitting in state like the king of the gods in heaven. He saw by his side his wife, the princess Santa, whose great beauty soothed and pleased him.

Vibhandaka blessed the king. He laid this injunction on his son: "Do all that will please this king. After the birth of a son, come and join me in the forest." Rishyasringa did as his father bade him.

Lomasa concluded the story with these words addressed to Yudhishthira: "Like Damayanti and Nala, Sita and Rama, Arundhati and Vasishtha, Lopamudra and Agastya, and

Draupadi and yourself, Santa and Rishyasringa repaired to the forest in the fulness of time and spent their lives in mutual love and the worship of God. This is the hermitage where Rishyasringa lived. Bathe in these waters and be purified." The Pandavas bathed there and performed their devotions.

CHAPTER XXXII

FRUITLESS PENANCE : STORY OF YAVAKRIDA

In the course of their wanderings, the Pandavas reached the hermitage of Raibhya on the banks of the Ganga.

Lomasa told them the story of the place:

"This is the ghat where Bharata, the son of Dasaratha, bathed. Indra was cleansed of the sin of killing Vritra unfairly, by these waters. Here also Sanatkumara became one with God. Aditi, the mother of the gods, offered oblations on this mountain and prayed to be blessed with a son. O Yudhishthira, ascend this holy mountain and the misfortunes, which have cast a cloud on your life, will vanish. Anger and passion will be washed off if you bathe in the running waters of this river."

Then Lomasa expatiated in greater detail on the sanctity of the place.

He began the story thus: "Yavakrida, the son of a sage, met with destruction in this very place."

He continued: "There lived in their hermitages two eminent brahmanas, named Bharadwaja and Raibhya, who were dear friends. Raibhya and his two sons, Paravasu and Arvavasu, learnt the Vedas and became famed scholars. Bharadwaja devoted himself wholly to the worship of God. He had a son named Yavakrida who saw with jealousy and hatred that the brahmanas did not respect his ascetic father as they did the learned Raibhya.

Yavakrida practised hard penance to gain the grace of Indra. He tortured his body with austerities and thus awakened the compassion of Indra, who appeared and asked him why he so mortified his flesh.

Yavakrida replied: "I wish to be more learned in the Vedas than any has ever been before. I wish to be a great scholar. I am performing these austerities to realise that desire. It takes a long time and involves much hardship to learn the Vedas from a teacher. I am practising austerities to acquire that knowledge directly. Bless me."

Indra smiled and said: "O brahmana, you are on the wrong path. Return home, seek a proper preceptor and learn the Vedas from him. Austerity is not the way to learning; the path is study and study alone." With these words Indra vanished.

But the son of Bharadwaja would not give up. He pursued his course of austerities with even greater rigour, to the horror and the distress of the gods. Indra again manifested himself before Yavakrida and warned him again: "You have taken the wrong path to acquire knowledge. You can acquire knowledge only by study. Your father learnt the Vedas by patient study and so can you. Go and study the Vedas. Desist from this vain mortification of the body."

Yavakrida did not heed even this second warning of Indra and announced defiantly that if his prayer was not granted, he would cut off his limbs one by one and offer them as oblations to the fire. No, he would never give up.

He continued his penance. One morning, during his austerities, when he went to bathe in the Ganga, he saw a gaunt old brahmana on the bank, laboriously throwing handfuls of sand into the water.

Yavakrida asked: "Old man, what are you doing?"

The old man replied: "I am going to build a dam across this river. When, with handful after handful, I have built a dam of sand here, people can cross the river with ease. See how very difficult it is at present to cross it. Useful work, isn't it?"

Yavakrida laughed and said: "What a fool you must be to think you can build a dam across this mighty river with your silly handfuls of sand! Arise and take to some more useful work."

The old man said: "Is my project more foolish than yours of mastering the Vedas not by study but by austerities?"

Yavakrida now knew that the old man was Indra. More humble this time, Yavakrida earnestly begged Indra to grant him learning as a personal boon.

Indra blessed, and comforted Yavakrida with the following words:

"Well, I grant you the boon you seek. Go and study the Vedas; you will become learned."

CHAPTER XXXIII

YAVAKRIDA'S END

YAVAKRIDA studied the Vedas and became learned. He grew vain with the thought that he had acquired the knowledge of the Vedas through the boon of Indra and not through human tutelage. Bharadwaja did not like this and feared that his son might ruin himself by slighting Raibhya. He thought it necessary to warn him.

"The gods," he said, "grant boons to foolish people who persistently practise penances, as intoxicants are sold to fools for money. They lead to loss of self-control, and this leads to the warping of the mind and utter destruction." He illustrated his advice by the ancient tale, which is given below:

In olden times there was a celebrated sage named Baladhi. He had a son whose untimely death plunged him into grief. So, he practised rigorous penance to get a son who would never meet with death.

The gods told the sage that this could never be, for the human race was necessarily mortal, and there need must be a limit to human life. They asked him to name his own limit. The sage replied: "In that case grant that the life of my son may persist as long as that mountain lasts." The boon was granted to him and he was duly blessed with a son named Medhavi.

Medhavi grew conceited at the thought that he was safe from death for ever, since he would live as long as the mountain existed, and he behaved with arrogance towards all.

One day, this vain man showed disrespect to a great sage named Dhanushaksha. At once that sage cursed that he might be turned to ashes, but the curse took no effect on Medhavi who remained in perfect health. Seeing this, the high-souled sage was non-plussed and then remembered the gift Medhavi had been endowed with at birth.

Dhanushaksha took the form of a wild buffalo and by the power of his penances butted at the mountain and broke it to pieces and Medhavi fell down dead.

Bharadwaja concluded the story with this solemn warning to his son: "Learn wisdom from this old story. Be not ruined by vanity. Cultivate self-restraint. Do not transgress the limits of good conduct and do not be disrespectful to the great Raibhya."

It was spring time. The trees and creepers were beautiful with flowers and the whole forest was gorgeous with colour and sweet with the song of birds.

The very earth seemed to be under the spell of the god of love. Paravasu's wife was strolling alone in the garden near the hermitage of Raibhya. She appeared more than human, in the sweet union in her of beauty, courage and purity. At that time Yavakrida came there and was so overwhelmed by her loveliness that he completely lost his sense and self-control and became as a ravening beast with lust. He accosted her and taking brutal advantage of her fear and shame and bewilderment, he dragged her to a lonely spot and violated her person.

Raibhya returned to his hermitage. He saw his daughter-in-law weeping, broken-hearted and inconsolable and learning of the shameful outrage perpetrated on her, he was seized with implacable anger. He plucked a hair from his head and offered it to the fire reciting a mantra.

At once, a maiden, as beautiful as his daughter-in-law, emerged from the sacrificial fire. The sage plucked another hair from his knotted lock and offered it as oblation. A terrible ghost rose from the fire. The sage commanded them to kill Yavakrida. Both of them bowed to the order.

While Yavakrida was performing the morning rites, the female spirit went near him and with smiles and allurements put him off his guard and as she ran away with his water-jug, the male ghost rushed on him with uplifted spear.

Yavakrida stood up in fear. Knowing that his mantras would be of no avail until he cleansed himself with water, he looked for his water-jug. When he found it missing, he rushed to a pond for water but the pond was dry. He went to a nearby stream which also dried up at his approach. There was no water for him anywhere. The terrible fiend pursued him everywhere and Yavakrida fled for his life, with the demon hot on his heels. His sin had consumed the power of his vigils and fasts. At last, he sought refuge in the sacrificial hall of his father. The half blind man who was guarding the hermitage stopped him as he could not recognise Yavakrida as, distorted with mortal fear, he sought to force his way in. Meanwhile, the fiend overtook him and killed him with his spear.

When Bharadwaja returned to his hermitage, he came upon his son's corpse and concluded that disrespect to Raibhya must have led to this cruel fate.

"Alas! My child, you died of your pride and vanity. Was it not a great mistake that you tried to learn the Vedas in a way not resorted to by any brahmana? Why did you behave so as to be cursed thus? May Raibhya, who caused the death of my only son, be himself killed by one of his sons!" Thus, carried away by rage and grief the sage cursed Raibhya.

Regaining control soon, he exclaimed in anguish: "Alas! They alone are blessed who have no sons. I have not only lost my only son, but in the madness of my grief I have also cursed my friend and companion. What is the use of continuing my life?" He cremated his son's body and died by throwing himself on the funeral pyre.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MERE LEARNING IS NOT ENOUGH

KING Brihadyumna, a disciple of the sage Raibhya, performed a great sacrifice at which he requested his teacher to let his two sons Paravasu and Arvavasu officiate. With the permission of their father, both of them went joyfully to the capital of the king.

While arrangements were being made for the sacrifice, Paravasu desired one day to go and see his wife and, walking alone all night, he reached his hermitage before dawn. Near the hermitage, he saw in the gloaming, what seemed to him a beast of prey crouching for a spring and, hurling his weapon at it, killed it. But to his horror and grief, he discovered that he had killed his own father clad in skins, mistaking him for a wild denizen of the forest. He realised that the fatal mistake was the effect of the curse of Bharadwaja. When he had hastily performed the funeral rites of his father, he went to Arvavasu and told him the doleful tale. He said: "But this mishap should not interfere with the sacrifice of the king. Please do the rites on my behalf in expiation of the sin I have unwittingly committed. There is, mercifully, atonement for sins committed in ignorance. If you can be my substitute here for undergoing the expiation I shall be able to go and assist in conducting the king's sacrifice. I can officiate unaided, which is a thing you cannot do as yet."

The virtuous brother agreed and said: "You may attend to the king's sacrifice. I shall do penance to free you from the terrible taint of having killed a father—and a brahmana."

The virtuous Arvavasu, accordingly, took upon himself the expiatory rites on behalf of his brother. That done, he came to the court of the king to join his brother and assist in the sacrifice.

The sin of Paravasu was not washed off, since expiation cannot be by proxy. It tainted his mind with wicked designs. Becoming jealous of the radiance on his brother's face, Paravasu decided to dishonour him by casting on him an unjust aspersion and accordingly, when Arvavasu entered the hall, Paravasu loudly exclaimed so that the king might hear: "This man has committed the sin of killing a brahmana and how can he enter this holy sacrificial place?"

Arvavasu indignantly denied the accusation but none heeded him, and he was ignominiously expelled from that hall of sacrifice by the orders of the king.

Arvavasu repeatedly protested his innocence. "It is my brother who has committed the sin—and even then it was through a mistake. I have saved him by performing expiatory rites." This made matters worse for him for nobody believed that the expiation he had undergone was not for his own crime and every one thought that he was adding false accusation against a blameless brother, to his other sins.

The virtuous Arvavasu who, besides being falsely accused of a monstrous crime, was also traduced as a liar, retreated to the forest in despair of finding justice in the world and betook himself to rigorous austerities.

The gods were gracious and asked him: "O virtuous soul, what is the boon you seek?" High thinking and deep meditation had in the meantime cleansed his heart of all anger at his brother's conduct; and so, he only prayed that his father might be restored to life and that his brother might be freed from wickedness and the sins that he had committed.

The gods granted his prayer.

Lomasa narrated this story to Yudhishthira at a place near Raibhya's hermitage and said: "O Pandavas, bathe here and wash off your passions in this holy river."

Arvavasu and Paravasu were both sons of a great scholar. Both of them learnt at his feet and became eminent scholars themselves. But learning is one thing and virtue is quite another. It is true that one should know the difference between good and evil, if one is to seek good and shun evil, but this knowledge should soak into every thought and influence every act in one's life. Then indeed knowledge becomes virtue. The knowledge, that is merely so much undigested information crammed into the mind, cannot instil virtue. It is just an outward show like our clothes and is no real part of us.

CHAPTER XXXV

ASHTAVAKRA

WHILE the Pandavas were wandering among holy places in the forest, they came one day to the hermitage of the personages immortalised in the Upanishads. Lomasa told Yudhishthira the story of that place.

Uddalaka, a great sage and teacher of Vedanta, had a disciple named Kagola, who was virtuous and devoted but had no great learning. So, the other disciples used to laugh and mock at him. Uddalaka, however, attached no great weight to his disciple's lack of erudition but really appreciated his virtues, devotion and good conduct and gave his daughter Sujata in marriage to him.

The couple was blessed with a son. A child generally inherits the characteristics of both the parents, but fortunately the grandson of Uddalaka took after his grandfather rather than his father and knew the Vedas even while he was in his mother's womb. When Kagola made mistakes, as he often did in reciting the Vedas, the child in the womb would twist his body with pain, and so it came to pass that he had eight crooks in his body when he was born. These crooks earned him the name of Ashtavakra which means "Eight-crooks."

Kagola, one ill-fated day, provoked a polemical contest with Vandi, the court scholar of Mithila, and, having been defeated, was made to drown himself.

Meanwhile Ashtavakra grew up to be a towering scholar even in his boyhood, and at the age of twelve he had already completed his study of the Vedas and the Vedanta.

One day, Ashtavakra learnt that Janaka, the king of Mithila was performing a great sacrifice in the course of which the assembled scholars would, as usual, debate on the sastras. Ashtavakra set out for Mithila, accompanied by his uncle Swetaketu.

On their way to the place of sacrifice at Mithila, they came across the king and his retinue. The attendants of the king marched in front shouting: "Move away. Make way for the King." Ashtavakra instead of moving out of the way said to the retainers:

"O royal attendants, even the king, if he is righteous, has to move and make way for the blind, the deformed, the fair sex, persons bearing loads and brahmanas learned in the Vedas. This is the rule enjoined by the scriptures."

The king, surprised at these wise words of the brahmana boy, accepted the justness of the rebuke and made way, observing to his attendants: "What this brahmana stripling says is true. Fire is fire whether it is tiny or big and it has the power to burn."

Ashtavakra and Swetaketu entered the sacrificial hall.

The gate-keeper stopped them and said: "Boys cannot go in. Only old men learned in the Vedas may go into the sacrificial hall."

Ashtavakra replied: "We are not mere boys. We have observed the necessary vows and have learnt the Vedas. Those who have mastered the truths of the Vedanta will not judge another on mere considerations of age or appearance."

The gate-keeper said: "Stop. Have done with your idle brag. How can you, a mere boy, have learnt and realised the Vedanta?"

The boy said: "You mean I am not big like an over-grown gourd with no substance in it? Size is no indication of knowledge or worth, nor is age. A very tall old man may be a tall old fool. Let me pass."

The gate-keeper said: "You are certainly not old, nor tall, though you talk like all the hoary sages. Get out."

Ashtavakra replied: "Gate-keeper, grey hairs do not prove the ripeness of the soul. The really mature man is the one who has learnt the Vedas and the Vedangas, mastered their gist and realised their essence. I am here to meet the court pandit Vandi. Inform King Janaka of my desire."

At that moment the king himself came there and easily recognized Ashtavakra, the precociously wise boy he had met before.

The king asked: "Do you know that my court pandit Vandi has overthrown in argument many great scholars in the past and caused them to be cast into the ocean? Does not that deter you from this dangerous adventure?"

Ashtavakra replied: "Your eminent scholar has not hitherto encountered men like me who are proficient in the Vedas or Vedanta. He has become arrogant and vain with easy victories over good men who were not real scholars. I have come here to repay the debt due on account of my father, who was defeated by this man and made to drown himself, as I have heard from my mother. I have no doubt I shall vanquish Vandi, whom you will see crumple up like a broken-wheeled cart. Please summon him."

Ashtavakra met Vandi. They took up a debatable thesis and started an argument, each employing his utmost learning and wits to confound the other; and in the end the assembly unanimously declared the victory of Ashtavakra and the defeat of Vandi. The court pandit of Mithila bowed his head and paid the forfeit by drowning himself in the ocean and going to the abode of Varuna.

Then the spirit of Kagola, the father of Ashtavakra, gained peace and joy in the glory of his son. The author of the epic instructs us through these words put in Kagola's mouth:

"A son need not be like his father. A father who is physically weak may have a very strong son and an ignorant father may have a scholarly son. It is wrong to assess the greatness of a man on his physical appearance or age. External appearances are deceptive."

Which shows that the unlearned Kagola was not devoid of common sense.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BHIMA AND HANUMAN

Draupadi used to complain frequently: "This Kamyaka forest is not beautiful without Arjuna. I find no joy in life in the absence of Arjuna."

The other Pandavas shared Draupadi's wretchedness at separation from Arjuna, who had gone to the Himalayas in quest of divine weapons.

Bhimasena told Draupadi: "Blessed lady, I myself feel the same about Arjuna and what you say makes me thrill with love and sympathy. Bereft of Arjuna, this beautiful forest seems desolate. My mind can know no peace without seeing Arjuna. Sahadeva, how do you feel?"

Sahadeva said: "This hermitage seems to be empty without Arjuna. We shall try whether a change of scene will help us to bear the pain of separation better."

Yudhishthira addressing his priest Dhaumya said: "I have sent my younger brother Arjuna to win divine weapons. That dauntless and dexterous hero has not yet returned. We have sent him to the Himalayas to get from Indra, the king of gods, weapons with which we could conquer Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Aswatthama, since it is certain that these heroes will fight on the side of the sons of Dhritarashtra. Karna knows the secret of divine weapons, and his supreme wish is to fight with Arjuna. I have sent Arjuna to gain Indra's grace and get weapons from him as the Kaurava heroes can be defeated by no other means. Having sent him on a very difficult errand, we cannot live here happily, for we miss him in all our accustomed haunts. I wish to go elsewhere, for that may enable us to bear the separation better. Can you suggest where we could go?"

Dhaumya described many forests and holy places. The Pandavas went the round of those places to relieve themselves to some extent from the pangs of separation. They spent many years in this pilgrimage and in listening to the traditions which sanctified each shrine. Draupadi would often feel exhausted by having to traverse mountains and forests. Bhima, sometimes helped by his son Ghatotkacha, would serve and encourage them and make their labours easy.

In the course of their wanderings through the Himalayan regions they came to a terrible forest where the path was rugged and steep. Yudhishthira was worried and told Bhima that the way would greatly distress Draupadi but that he himself would go on accompanied by Nakula and the sage Lomasa. He suggested that Bhima and Sahadeva should stay behind at Gangadwara with Draupadi.

Bhima would not agree. He said that the pain of separation from Arjuna ought to have taught his brother how much he would suffer if he was parted from Sahadeva, Draupadi and Bhima. Besides, Bhima could not leave Yudhishthira alone in this forest infested with rakshasas, demons and wild animals. The way was hard, but he could easily carry Draupadi across the most difficult parts of it. He could carry Nakula and Sahadeva also.

When Bhima said these words Yudhishthira embraced him and blessed him and wished him an increase of physical strength.

Draupadi smiled and said, addressing Yudhishthira: "No one need carry me. I can walk. Do not be anxious about me."

They reached Kulinda, the kingdom of Subahu, on the Himalayas. They accepted the honours rendered to them by that king and rested there awhile. Later on, they went to the charming forest of Narayanasrama and halted there.

One day, a breeze that blew from the north-east wafted a beautiful flower near Draupadi. Draupadi took it in her hands and was so charmed with its fragrance and beauty that she showed it rapturously to Bhima. "Come and see this flower. What a sweet fragrance! How charming! I shall hand this over to Yudhishthira. Bring some flowers of this kind. We should grow this plant in our Kamyaka forest." Draupadi ran to give the flower to Yudhishthira.

Anxious to please his beloved Draupadi, Bhima went in quest of that plant. He went alone in the direction from which the fragrance seemed to be borne by the breeze, without wasting a thought on the wild beasts that crossed his path.

He presently came to a garden of plantain trees at the foot of a mountain, and there he saw a huge monkey shining like blazing fire, which lay right across his path blocking it. He tried to frighten the animal out of his way by shouting at it; it only half opened its eyes lazily and drawled: "I am indisposed and so I am lying here. Why did you wake me? You are a wise human being and I am mere animal. It is only proper that the rational man should show mercy to animals as inferior creatures. I am afraid you are ignorant of right and wrong. Who are you? Whither are you bound? It is not possible to go further along this mountain path which is the path of the gods. Men cannot cross this limit. Eat what you like of the fruits of this place and if you are wise, go back in peace."

Bhima, unused to being taken so lightly, grew angry and shouted: "Who are you, yourself, you monkey, that indulges in such tall talk? I am a kshatriya hero, a descendant of the Kuru race and a son of Kunti. Know that I am the son of the Wind god. Now move away from the path or stop me at your peril."

Hearing these words the monkey merely smiled and said: "I am, as you say, a monkey, but you will come to destruction if you try to force a way."

Bhima said: "I do not want your advice and it is no concern of yours if I go to destruction. Get up and move out of the way or I will make you."

The monkey replied: "I have no strength to stand up, being but a very old monkey. If you have to go at any cost, jump over me."

Bhima said: "Nothing could be easier but the scriptures forbid it. Otherwise I should jump over you and the mountain in one bound, like Hanuman crossing the ocean."

The monkey remarked as though in surprise: "O best of men, who is that Hanuman who crossed the ocean? If you know his story, enlighten me."

Bhima roared and said: "Have you not heard of Hanuman, my elder brother, who crossed the ocean, a hundred yojanas in breadth, to seek and find Sita, the wife of Rama? I am equal to him in strength and heroism. Well, that is enough talk, now get up and make way and do not provoke me to do you some harm."

The monkey answered: "O mighty hero, be patient. Be gentle as you are strong, and have mercy on the old and weak. I have no strength to rise up as I am decrepit with age. Since you have scruples in jumping over me, kindly move aside my tail and make a path for yourself."

Proud of his immense strength, Bhima thought to pull the monkey out of the way by its tail. But, to his amazement he could not move it in the least, though he exerted all his strength. He set his jaws and strained every muscle till the very sinews cracked and he was covered with perspiration, but, still, could not move that tail the least, a little bit up or down or side-ways. In shame, he bent down his head, and then asked in a chastened mood: "Who are you? Forgive me and reveal to me whether you are a siddha, god or gandharva." Bhima like most strong men, was all respect when he saw one stronger than himself, and spoke like a pupil addressing his master.

Hanuman replied: "O mighty-armed Pandava, know that I am your brother, even that Hanuman, the son of the Wind god, whom you mentioned a little while ago. If you go on this path, which is the road to the spirit-world where the yakshas and the rakshasas abide, you will meet with danger and that is why I stop you. No man can go beyond this and live. But here is the stream with its depths where you can find the Saugandhika plant you came to seek."

Bhima was transported with delight: "I count myself the most fortunate of men in that I have been blessed to meet my brother. I wish to see the form in which you crossed the ocean," and he prostrated before Hanuman.

Hanuman smiled and began to increase the size of his body and stood four square to the world like a mountain, seeming to fill the landscape. Bhima was thrilled at actually seeing that divine form of this elder brother, the mere description of which had till then filled him with wonder. He covered his eyes, unable to bear the dazzling light radiating from that figure.

Hanuman said: "Bhima, in the presence of my enemies, my body can grow still more."

And Hanuman contracted his body, resuming his former size. He tenderly embraced Bhimasena.

Bhagavan Vyasa says that Bhima felt completely refreshed and became much stronger than before by the embrace of Hanuman.

Hanuman said: "O hero, go to your abode. Think of me whenever you are in need. I felt the same delight when I embraced you that I had in times of yore when I was fortunate enough to touch the divine body of Sri Rama. Ask any boon that you like."

Bhima said: "Blessed are the Pandavas for I have had the good fortune to see you. Inspired with your strength we are sure to conquer our enemies."

Hanuman gave this parting blessing to his brother:

"While you roar like a lion in the battlefield, my voice shall join yours and strike terror into the hearts of your enemies. I shall be present on the flag of the chariot of your brother Arjuna. You will be victorious."

Hanuman pointed out to Bhima the stream hard by, where grew the Saugandhika flowers he had come to seek. This put Bhima at once in mind of Draupadi who was waiting for his return, and he collected the flowers and returned to her without delay.

CHAPTER XXXVII

I AM NO CRANE

ONCE the sage Markandeya came to see the Pandavas. Yudhishthira happened to talk of the virtues of the fair sex and said:

"What greater wonder is there in this world than the patience and the chastity of woman? She gives birth to a child after cherishing it in her womb as dearer than life itself. She brings it into the world in pain and anxiety and thence forward her one thought is for its health and happiness. Large-hearted and forgiving, a woman forgives and continues to love even a wicked husband who neglects and hates and subjects her to all sorts of miseries. How strange!"

Hearing this Markandeya told him a sacred story.

There was once a brahmana named Kausika who observed his vow of brahmacharya with great steadfastness and devotion. One day, he sat under a tree reciting the Vedas. A crane, perched on the top of the tree, defiled his head with its droppings. He looked up at it, and his angry look killed the bird and it fell down dead. The brahmana was pained when he saw the dead bird lying on the ground.

How frightful it would be if wishes fulfilled themselves, if each hasty or angry wish took effect at once! How much there would be to regret or repent afterwards! It is lucky for us that wishes depend on outward circumstances for accomplishment, since that saves us from much sin and sorrow.

Kausika sorrowed that the evil thought that passed in his mind in a moment of anger had killed an innocent bird. Some time later, he went as usual to beg alms.

He stood before the door of a house to receive his dole. The housewife was cleansing utensils at that time. Kausika waited in the hope that she would attend to him after her work was over. In the meantime the master of the house returned, tired and hungry, and the wife had to attend to his wants, wash and dry his feet and serve him with food. In this preoccupation she seemed to have forgotten the mendicant waiting outside. After her husband had been cared for and fed, she came out with alms to the mendicant. She said: "I am sorry to have kept you waiting long. Pardon me."

Kausika, burning with anger, said: "Lady, you have made me wait for such a long time. This indifference is not fair."

The woman told the brahmana: "Best of brahmanas, kindly do forgive me. I was serving my husband and hence the delay."

The brahmana remarked: "It is right and proper to attend on the husband, but the brahmana also should not be disregarded. You seem an arrogant woman."

She said: "Be not angry with me and remember that I kept you waiting only because I was dutifully serving my husband. I am no crane to be killed by a violent thought and your rage can do no harm to the woman who devotes herself to the service of her husband."

The brahmana was taken aback. He wondered how the woman knew of the crane incident.

She continued: "O great one, you do not know the secret of duty, and you are also not aware that anger is the greatest enemy that dwells in man. Forgive the delay in attending to you. Go to Mithila and be instructed in the secret of good life by Dharmavyadha living in that city."

The brahmana was amazed. He said: "I deserve your just admonition and it will do me good. May all good attend you." With these words he went to Mithila.

Kausika reached Mithila and looked for Dharmavyadha's residence, which he thought would be some lonely hermitage far from the noise and bustle of common life. He walked along magnificent roads between beautiful houses and gardens in that great city and finally reached a butcher's shop, in which was a man selling meat. His amazement was great when he learnt that this man was Dharmavyadha.

The brahmana was shocked beyond measure and stood at a distance in disgust. The butcher suddenly rose from his seat, came to the brahmana and inquired: "Revered sir, are you well? Did that chaste brahmana lady send you to me?"

The brahmana was stupefied.

"Revered sir, I know why you have come. Let us go home," said the butcher and he took the brahmana to his house where he saw a happy family and was greatly struck by the devotion with which the butcher served his parents. Kausika took his lessons from that butcher on dharma, man's calling and duty. Afterwards, the brahmana returned to his house and began to tend his parents, a duty which he had rather neglected before.

The moral of this striking story of Dharmavyadha so skilfully woven by Vedavyasa into the Mahabharata, is the same as the teaching of the Gita, that man reaches perfection by the honest pursuit of whatever calling falls to his lot in life, and that this is really worship of God Who created and pervades all.* The occupation may be one he is born to in society or it may have been forced on him by circumstances or he may have taken it up by choice but what really matters is the spirit of sincerity and faithfulness with which he does his life's work. Vedavyasa emphasises this great truth by making a scholarly

---

*Bhagavad Gita, XVIII, 45–46.

brahmana, who did not know it, learn it from a butcher, who lived it in his humble and despised life.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE WICKED ARE NEVER SATISFIED

MANY brahmanas visited the Pandavas during their exile, and one such, returning to Hastinapura, went to see Dhritarashtra, who received him with due honour. The brahmana told him how the Pandavas, born princes, were, by unkind destiny, at the mercy of the wind and the sun and suffered great privations. Dhritarashtra was probably sorry to hear this, but what troubled him most was the consequences to his own sons. Could Yudhishthira continue to hold the justly wrathful Bhima in check? Dhritarashtra feared that the anger of the Pandavas, long pent up, might one day break its bounds and overflow in a devastating flood. The king anxiously pondered thus: "Arjuna and Bhima will certainly try to punish us. Sakuni, Karna, Duryodhana and the short-sighted Duhsasana are perched precariously up a tree in search of a honeycomb while below is the abyss of Bhima's anger yawning to receive them to their destruction."

The blind king pursued his thought: "Alas, why did we become a prey to covetousness? It is not as though poverty drove us to it! Why did we take to the path of injustice? Instead of enjoying our boundless wealth in contentment we succumbed to lust of power and possession and coveted what was not ours. Wrong cannnot but yield its bitter harvest! Arjuna has returned from heaven with divine weapons. What could tempt one back to earth from heaven but the craving for vengeance? And we have earned it!" These thoughts would haunt and give him no peace.

Though Dhritarashtra was thus worried, Sakuni, Karna and Duryodhana were giddily happy and found much pleasure in exulting congratulation of one another on their prosperity. Karna and Sakuni said to Duryodhana: "The kingdom which was in the hands of Yudhishthira has become ours. We need no longer burn with jealousy." Duryodhana replied: "O Karna, all that is true, but would it not be a joy of joys to see with my own eyes the sufferings of the Pandavas and bring their sorrow to a climax by a display of our happiness? The only way to perfect our happiness is to go to the forest and see the distress of the Pandavas, but my father will refuse permission," and Duryodhana shed tears at his father's cruelty in denying him this pleasure.

He said again: "The king fears the Pandavas, as he thinks that they are endowed with the power of austerities, and forbids us to go to the forest and meet them, lest danger should befall us. But I tell you, all we have done so far is labour lost, without a sight of the sufferings of Draupadi, Bhima and Arjuna in the forest. This life of idle ease is torment to me without that great joy. Sakuni and yourself must seek a way of obtaining the king's consent for us to go to the forest and see the Pandavas in their misery."

Early next morning, Karna went to Duryodhana with a cheerful face and announced that he had found a way out of the difficulty. He said: "What do you think of going to our ranches at Dwaitavana for the annual stock-taking of the cows? The king certainly cannot object to that." Sakuni and Duryodhana applauded this bright idea and sent the leader of the cowherds to the king to secure his permission.

But the king would not assent. He said: "Hunting is indeed beneficial to the princes. It is also desirable to take stock of the cows. But I learn that the Pandavas are dwelling in that forest. It is not advisable for you to go there. I cannot agree to send you to a place near the abode of Bhima and Arjuna while there is still occasion for anger and strife."

Duryodhana said: "We shall not go near them. On the contrary we shall be very careful and avoid them."

The king answered: "However careful you may be, there is danger in mere nearness. Also, it is not right to intrude on the sorrows of the Pandavas in their forest life. Any one of your soldiers might trespass and give offence, which may lead to trouble. Some one else can go in your stead to count the cattle."

Sakuni said: "O king, Yudhishthira knows and follows the path of dharma. He has given his promise in the open assembly and the Pandavas will follow his bidding. The sons of Kunti will not show any enmity towards us. Do not oppose Duryodhana who is fond of hunting. Let him return after taking stock of the cows. I shall also accompany him and see to it that none of us go anywhere near the Pandavas."

The king, over-persuaded as usual, said: "Well, please yourselves.

A heart full of hate can know no contentment. Hate is a cruel fire which extorts the fuel on which it lives and grows.

CHAPTER XXXIX

DURYODHANA DISGRACED

THE Kauravas reached Dwaitavana with a great army and many followers. Duryodhana and Karna went with unconcealed joy at the very thought of being able to gloat on the sad plight of the Pandavas. They themselves camped in luxurious rest-houses in a place four miles off the abode of the Pandavas.

They inspected the herds of cows and took stock of them. After counting the cows, bulls and calves, they enjoyed the dance, the hunt, the sylvan sports and other entertainments arranged for them.

While hunting, Duryodhana and his party reached an attractive pond near the hermitage of the Pandavas and ordered a camp to be put on its bank.

Chitrasena, the king of the gandharvas, and his attendants had already encamped in the neighbourhood of the pool and they prevented Duryodhana's men from putting up their camp. They returned to Duryodhana and represented that some petty prince who was there with his followers was giving them trouble.

Duryodhana was nettled at this presumption and directed his men to turn the princelet out and put up the tents.

The attendants returned to the lake and tried to carry out their orders but found the gandharvas too many for them and had to retreat in precipitation.

When Duryodhana came to know of this, he grew very angry and with a large army marched to destroy the audacious enemies who had dared to resist his pleasure.

A great fight ensued between the gandharvas and Duryodhana's army. At first the fight went in favour of the Kauravas, but the tables were quickly turned when Chitrasena, the king of the gandharvas, rallied his troops and began using his magic weapons. Karna and the other Kaurava heroes lost their chariots and weapons and had to retreat in haste and ignominy. Duryodhana alone remained in the battle-field but he was soon seized by Chitrasena, who placed him in his chariot bound hand and foot, and blew his conch in token of victory. The gandharvas took many of the prominent Kauravas captive. The

Kaurava army fled in all directions and some of the fugitives took refuge in the hermitage of the Pandavas.

Bhima heard the news of Duryodhana's defeat and capture with delight and amusement. He said to Yudhishthira: "These gandharvas have done our job for us. Duryodhana, who must have come here to mock at us, has got what he deserved. I feel like thanking our gandharva friend!"

But Yudhishthira reproved him: "Dear brother, this is not the time for you to rejoice. The Kauravas are our kith and kin and their humiliation, at the hands of strangers, is ours. We cannot hold back and take this lying down. We must rescue them."

Bhima did not think this very reasonable.

He said: "Why should we save this sinner who tried to burn us alive in the wax house? Why should you feel sorry for the fellow who poisoned my food, bound me hand and foot and wanted to drown me in the river? What brotherly feeling can we really have towards these vile wretches who hauled Draupadi by the hair to the assembly and disgraced her?"

At that moment a cry of agony from Duryodhana reached them faintly from the distance and Yudhishthira, greatly moved, overruled Bhima's objection and bade his brothers go to the rescue of the Kauravas. Obedient to his behest, Bhima and Arjuna rallied the routed Kaurava forces and offered battle to the gandharvas. But Chitrasena had no wish to fight with the Pandavas and at their approach, released Duryodhana and the other prisoners saying that all he wanted was to teach a lesson to these arrogant Kauravas. The dishonoured Kauravas returned in haste to Hastinapura, with Karna, who, having been driven off the battle-field, joined them on the way.

Duryodhana, in great shame and dejection, felt it would have been far better if he had been killed by Chitrasena and announced his wish to fast unto death.

He said to Duhsasana: "Be crowned and rule the kingdom. I can no longer continue to live after having become a laughing-stock to my enemies."

Duhsasana protested his unworthiness to be king and caught hold of his brother's feet and wept. Karna could not bear the sight of the brother's sorrow.

Karna said: "This does not befit heroes of the Kuru race. What is the use of just collapsing under sorrow? It will but make your enemies happy. Look at the Pandavas. They have not taken to fasts in spite of the disgrace they have suffered."

Sakuni interposed and said: "Listen to Karna's words. Why do you say that you would give up your life when the kingdom seized from the Pandavas is yours to enjoy? Fasting serves no purpose, for if you really repent of what you have done till now, you should make friends with the Pandavas and give them back their kingdom."

When Duryodhana heard this speech, his evil nature regained ascendancy, for giving back the kingdom to the Pandavas was to him a hundred times worse than defeat or disgrace. He shouted: "I shall conquer the Pandavas."

Karna said: "That is the way for a king to talk."

And he added: "What sense is there in dying? You can do something worthwhile only if you are alive."

While returning home, Karna said: "I swear to you by all that is holy that, when the stipulated period of thirteen years is over, I will kill Arjuna in battle." And then he touched his sword in token of the oath.

CHAPTER XL

SRI KRISHNA'S HUNGER

WHILE the Pandavas were dwelling in the forest, Duryodhana celebrated a great sacrifice with much pomp and splendour. He wanted to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice, but the brahmanas told him that he could not do that while Yudhishthira and Dhritarashtra were alive and advised him to perform the sacrifice known as the Vaishnava instead. He accepted this advice and celebrated the Vaishnava with great splendour.

But when the ceremony was over, the citizens began to talk among themselves that Duryodhana's sacrifice had not come up to even a sixteenth part of Yudhishthira's Rajasuya in magnificence. The friends of Duryodhana, on the other hand, praised him and the sacrifice he had celebrated and likened it to those performed by Yayati, Mandhata, Bharata and others. Court sycophants were not sparing with their incense. Karna told Duryodhana that his Rajsuya had been only postponed till the Pandavas should be defeated and slain in battle and repeated that his part would be the slaying of Arjuna.

"Till I have slain Arjuna," said he, "I shall not take meat or wine, nor will I refuse the prayer of anyone who asks me for anything." Such was the solemn vow taken by Karna in the assembly.

The sons of Dhritarashtra were delighted to hear this vow of the great hero Karna and shouted in joy. They felt as if the Pandavas had been slain already.

Spies conveyed to the Pandavas in the forest the news of the oath taken by Karna. Yudhishthira was greatly concerned, for he had a great opinion of Karna's prowess. Karna had been born with divine armour and was undoubtedly a mighty hero.

One morning, just before the hour of awakening, Yudhishthira had a dream. Many of our dreams come either in the beginning or at the end of our sleep. He dreamt that the wild beasts of the forest came and appealed to him piteously not to destroy them altogether, but to move on to some other forest. They invoked his mercy with tears and supplications. Much moved, he proceeded to another forest with his brothers.

Our ancestors were well aware that wild life in the forest should be conserved.

One day, the sage Durvasa went to Duryodhana with his ten thousand disciples. Knowing the sage's temper, Duryodhana carefully attended himself to all matters connected with the reception of the guests and was so lavish in his hospitality that the sage was gratified and told him to ask any boon.

Duryodhana felt greatly relieved at having come so safely out of the ordeal and when the sage asked him to seek a boon, it occurred to him that here was an opportunity of letting loose the irritable sage on the Pandavas, and he said: "You have blessed us, great sage, by accepting our hospitality. Our brothers are in the forest. Kindly deign to visit them also, so that they may likewise be honoured and happy," and suggested for the visit a time when he knew that all the food prepared would have been eaten and none would be left for unexpected guests.

The sage, who liked always to test people, consented to do as Duryodhana had requested.

Duryodhana felt sure that the Pandavas, who themselves lived from hand to mouth in the forest, would be unable to feed or entertain the sage and his following, and would incur some dreadful curse from that too hasty visitor for their want of hospitality. This would give him greater joy than any benefit he could have asked for himself when the sage offered a boon.

Durvasa went with his disciples to the Pandavas as was desired by Duryodhana, as the latter were resting after their midday meal. The brothers welcomed the sage, saluted and honoured him. Then the sage said: "We shall be back soon. Our meals must be ready then, for we are hungry," and hurried off with his disciples to the river.

As a result of the austerities of Yudhishthira at the beginning of their stay in the forest, the Sun god had given him the Akshayapatra, a wonderful vessel which held a never-failing supply of food. In making the gift, the god had said, "Through this I shall place at your disposal for twelve years as much food as is required for your daily consumption. Not till everyone has been served and Draupadi herself has taken her share will the vessel become empty for the day."

Accordingly, the brahmanas and other guests would be served first. Afterwards the Pandava brothers would take their meals. Finally, Draupadi would have her share. When Durvasa reached the place, all of them, including Draupadi, had eaten their meals and so the vessel was empty and denuded of its power for the day.

Draupadi was greatly troubled and perfectly at a loss to find food when the sage and his disciples should return after their ablutions. In the kitchen, she prayed earnestly to Sri Krishna to come to her aid in this hopeless predicament and deliver her from the wrath of the sage.

At once Sri Krishna appeared before her. "I am very hungry," he said, "bring without delay something to eat and we shall speak of other things afterwards."

Here was a pretty pass. It looked as though the ally from whom she hoped for relief had gone over to the foe! She cried out in great confusion: "Alas! Why do you try me thus, O Krishna? The power of the vessel given by the Sun is exhausted for the day. And the sage Durvasa has come. What shall I do? The sage and his disciples will soon be here and as though this were not enough, you have also come at this juncture saying that you are hungry."

Sri Krishna said: "I am terribly hungry and want food, not excuses. Fetch the vessel and let me see for myself."

Draupadi brought it to him. A tiny bit of cooked vegetable and a grain of rice were sticking to the rim of the vessel. Sri Krishna ate them with satisfaction, accepting them as Sri Hari, the Soul of the Universe.

Draupadi was filled with shame at her slovenliness in not having cleaned the vessel free of all remnants. A bit had been left which had been partaken by Vasudeva!

Sri Krishna seemed replete with satisfaction after eating his solitary grain and calling Bhima, told him to go to the river and intimate to the revered sage that food was ready and waiting for them.

Bhimasena, greatly puzzled, but full of faith in Sri Krishna, hastened to the river where Durvasa and his followers were bathing. They were in great surprise to find that their ravenous hunger had given place to a pleased satiety. They had all the comfortable cheerfulness of people who had feasted well. The disciples told the sage: "We have come here after asking Yudhishthira to prepare food for us, but we feel well-fed and full and cannot eat anything more." Durvasa knew what it was and he told Bhima: "We have taken our meals. Tell Yudhishthira to forgive us." Then the party went away.

The explanation is that as the whole universe is contained in Sri Krishna, his satisfaction with a single grain of rice satisfied for the time the hunger of all beings including the sage.

CHAPTER XLI

THE ENCHANTED POOL

THE stipulated period of twelve years was drawing to a close.

One day, a deer was rubbing itself against a poor brahmana's fire-kindling mortar and as it turned to go, the mortar got entangled in its horns and the affrighted animal fled wildly with it into the forest. In those days matches were unknown and fire was kindled with pieces of wood by mechanical friction.

"Alas! The deer is running away with my fire-kindler. How can I perform the fire sacrifice?" shouted the brahmana and rushed towards the Pandavas for help in his extremity.

The Pandavas pursued the animal but it was a magic deer which sped in great leaps and bounds, decoying the Pandavas far into the forest and then disappeared. Worn out by the futile chase, the Pandavas sat in great dejection under a banyan tree. Nakula sighed: "We cannot render even this trifling service to the brahmana. How we have degenerated!" said he sadly.

Bhima said: "Quite so. When Draupadi was dragged into the assembly, we should have killed those wretches. Is it not because we did not do so that we have had to suffer all these sorrows?" and he looked at Arjuna sadly.

Arjuna agreed. “I bore in silence the vulgar and insulting brag of that son of the charioteer, doing nothing. So we have deservedly fallen into this pitiable state.”

Yudhishthira noticed with sorrow that all of them had lost their cheerfulness and courage. He thought they would be more cheerful with something to do. He was tormented with thirst and so he said to Nakula: “Brother, climb that tree and see whether there is any pool or river nearby.”

Nakula climbed the tree, looked around and said: “At a little distance I see water plants and cranes. There must certainly be water there.”

Yudhishthira sent him to fetch some to drink.

Nakula was glad when he got to the place and saw there was a pool. He was very thirsty himself and so thought of quenching his thirst first before taking water in his quiver for his brother; but no sooner did he dip his hand in the transparent water than he heard a voice which said:

“Do not be rash. This pool belongs to me. O son of Madri, answer my questions and then drink the water.”

Nakula was surprised, but carried away by his intense thirst and heedless of the warning, he drank the water. At once, overcome by irresistible drowsiness, he fell down, to all appearance dead.

Surprised that Nakula had not returned, Yudhishthira sent Sahadeva to see what the matter was. When Sahadeva reached the pool and saw his brother lying on the ground, he wondered whether any harm had come to him, but before looking into the matter further, rushed irresistibly to the water to quench his burning thirst.

The voice was heard again: “O Sahadeva, this is my pool. Answer my questions and then only may you quench your thirst.”

Like Nakula, Sahadeva also did not heed the warning. He drank the water and at once dropped down.

Puzzled and worried that Sahadeva also did not return, Yudhishthira sent Arjuna to see whether the brothers had met with any danger. “And bring water,” he added, for he was very thirsty.

Arjuna went swiftly. He saw both his brothers lying dead near the pool. He was shocked at the sight and felt that they must have been killed by some lurking foe. Though heartbroken with grief and burning with the desire for revenge, he felt all feelings else submerged in a monstrous thirst which irresistibly impelled him to the fatal pool. Again, a voice was heard: "Answer my question before you drink the water. This pool is mine. If you disobey me, you follow your brothers."

Arjuna's anger knew no bounds. He cried: "Who are you? Come and stand up to me, and I will kill you," and he shot keen-edged arrows in the direction of the voice. The invisible being laughed in scorn: "Your arrows do but wound the air. Answer my questions and then you can satisfy your thirst. If you drink the water without doing so, you will die."

Greatly vexed, Arjuna made up his mind to seek out and grapple with this elusive foe, but first he must quench his terrible thirst. Yes, thirst was the enemy he must kill first. So he drank the water and also fell down dead.

After anxious waiting Yudhishthira turned to Bhima: "Dear brother, Arjuna, the great hero, has also not yet returned. Something terrible must have happened to our brothers, for our stars are bad. Please seek them out and be quick about it. Also bring water, for I die of thirst." Bhima, racked with anxiety, hurried away without a word.

His grief and rage can be imagined when he saw his three brothers lying there dead. He thought: "This is certainly the work of the yakshas. I will hunt them down and kill them, but O! I am so thirsty, I shall first drink water the better to fight them." And then he descended into the pool.

The voice shouted: "Bhimasena, beware. You may drink only after answering my questions. You will die if you disregard my words."

"Who are you to dictate to me?" cried Bhima, and he drank the water avidly, glaring around in defiance. And as he did so, his great strength seemed to slip from him like a garment, and he also fell dead among his brothers.

Lone, Yudhishthira wailed in a hell of anxiety and thirst. "Have they been subjected to a curse or are they wandering about in the forest in vain search for water or have they fainted or died of thirst?" Unable to bear these thoughts, and driven desperate by an overpowering thirst, he started out to look for his brothers and the pool.

Yudhishthira proceeded in the direction his brothers had taken through tracts infested with wild boar and abounding in spotted dear and huge forest birds, and presently came upon a beautiful green meadow, girdling a pool of pellucid water, nectar to his eyes. But when he saw his brothers lying there like sacred flagpoles thrown pell-mell after a festival, unable to restrain his grief, he lifted his voice and wept.

He stroked the faces of Bhima and Arjuna as they lay so still and silent there and mourned: "Was this to be the end of all our vows? Just when our exile is about to end, you have been snatched away. Even the gods have forsaken me in my misfortune!'"

As he looked at their mighty limbs, now so helpless, he sadly wondered who could have been powerful enough to kill them. Brokenly, he reflected: "Surely my heart must be made of steel not to break even after seeing Nakula and Sahadeva lie dead. For what purpose should I continue to live in this world? Then a sense of mystery overcame him, for this could be no ordinary occurrence. The world held no warriors who could overcome his brothers; besides, there were no wounds on their bodies which could have let out life and their faces were faces of men who slept in peace and not of those who died in wrath. There was also no trace of the footprints of an enemy. There was surely some magic about it. Or, could it be a trick played by Duryodhana? Might he not have poisoned the water? Then Yudhishthira also descended into the pool, in his turn drawn to the water by a consuming thirst. At once the voice without form warned as before:

"Your brothers died because they did not heed my words. Do not follow them. Answer my questions first and then quench your thirst. This pool is mine."

Yudhishthira knew that these could be none other than the words of a yaksha and guessed what had happened to his brothers. He saw a possible way of redeeming the situation. He said to the bodiless voice: "Please ask your questions."

The voice put questions rapidly one after another.

It asked: "What makes sun shine every day?"

Yudhishthira replied: "The power of Brahman."

"What rescues man in danger?"

"Courage is man's salvation in danger."

"By the study of which science does man become wise?"

"Not by studying any sastra does man become wise. It is by association with the great in wisdom that he gets wisdom."

The yaksha asked: "What is more nobly sustaining than the earth?"

Yudhishthira replied: "The mother who brings up the children she has borne is nobler and more sustaining than the earth."

"What is higher than the sky?"

"The father."

"What is fleeter than wind?"

"Mind."

"What is more blighted than withered straw?"

"A sorrow-stricken heart."

"What befriends a traveller?"

"Learning."

"Who is the friend of one who stays at home?"

"The wife."

"Who accompanies a man in death?"

"Dharma. That alone accompanies the soul in its solitary journey after death."

"Which is the biggest vessel?"

"The earth, which contains all within itself is the greatest vessel."

"What is happiness?"

"Happiness is the result of good conduct."

"What is that, abandoning which man becomes loved by all?"

"Pride—for abandoning that man will be loved by all."

"What is the loss which yields joy and not sorrow?"

"Anger—giving it up, we will no longer be subject to sorrow."

"What is that, by giving up which, man becomes rich?"

"Desire—getting rid of it, man becomes wealthy."

"What makes one a real brahmana? Is it birth, good conduct or learning? Answer decisively."

"Birth and learning do not make one a brahmana. Good conduct alone does. However learned a person may be he will not be a brahmana if he is a slave to bad habits. Even though he may be learned in the four Vedas, a man of bad conduct falls to a lower class."

"What is the greatest wonder in the world?"

"Every day, men see creatures depart to Yama's abode and yet, those who remain, seek to live for ever. This verily is the greatest wonder."

Thus, the yaksha posed many questions and Yudhishthira answered them all.

In the end the yaksha asked: "O king, one of your dead brothers can now be revived. Whom do you want revived? He shall come back to life."

Yudhishthira thought for a moment and then replied: "May the cloud-complexioned, lotus-eyed, broad-chested and long-armed Nakula, lying like a fallen ebony tree, arise."

The yaksha was pleased at this and asked Yudhishthira: "Why did you choose Nakula in preference to Bhima who has the strength of sixteen thousand elephants? I have heard that Bhima is most dear to you. And why not Arjuna, whose prowess in arms is your protection? Tell me why you chose Nakula rather than either of these two."

Yudhishthira replied: "O yaksha, dharma is the only shield of man and not Bhima or Arjuna. If dharma is set at naught, man will be ruined. Kunti and Madri were the two wives of my father. I am surviving, a son of Kunti, and so, she is not completely bereaved. In order that the scales of justice may be even, I ask that Madri's son Nakula may revive."

The yaksha was pleased with Yudhishthira's impartiality and granted that all his brothers would come back to life.

It was Yama, the Lord of Death, who had taken the form of the deer and the yaksha so that he might see his son Yudhishthira and test him. He embraced Yudhishthira and blessed him.

Yama said: "Only a few days remain to complete the stipulated period of your exile in the forest. The thirteenth year will also pass by. None of your enemies will be able to discover you. You will successfully fulfil your undertaking," and saying this he disappeared.

The Pandavas had, no doubt, to pass through all sorts of troubles during their exile, but the gains too were not inconsiderable. It was a period of hard discipline and searching probation through which they emerged stronger and nobler men. Arjuna returned from tapas with divine weapons and strengthened by contact with Indra. Bhima also met his elder brother Hanuman near the lake where the Saugandhika flowers bloomed and got tenfold strength from his embrace. Having met, at the enchanted pool, his father Yama, the Lord of Dharma, Yudhishthira shone with tenfold lustre.

"The minds of those who listen to the sacred story of Yudhishthira's meeting with his father, will never go after evil. They will never seek to create quarrels among friends or covet the wealth of others. They will never fall victims to lust. They will never be unduly attached to transitory things.” Thus said Vaisampayana to Janamejaya as he related this story of the yaksha. May the same good attend the readers of this story as retold by us.

CHAPTER XLII

DOMESTIC SERVICE

“O BRAHMANAS, we have been deceived by the sons of Dhritarashtra, cheated out of our kingdom and reduced to poverty. Still we have passed these years cheerfully with joy in the forest. The thirteenth year of exile has come, and with it the time for us to part from you, for we have to spend the next twelve months undiscovered by the spies of Duryodhana. God knows when the day will dawn which will see us together again, without fear or concealment. Now, bless us before we go, and may we escape the notice of those who may wish to betray us to the sons of Dhritarashtra, either through fear or hope of reward.” So spoke Yudhishthira to the brahmanas who were living with the Pandavas till then. His voice shook with emotion as he spoke these words.

Dhaumya consoled him. He said: “Parting is hard, and the dangers are many and great, but you are too wise and learned to be shaken or daunted. You must disguise yourselves. Indra, the Lord of gods, when pested by the demons, disguised himself as a brahmana and lived unknown in the country of Nishadha. Safely concealed thus, he managed to destroy his enemies. You must also do likewise. Did not Mahavishnu, the Lord of the Universe, become a child in the womb of Aditi, suffer human birth, and take away from Emperor Bali his kingdom for the salvation of the world? Did not Lord Narayana, the refuge of men, enter into the weapon of Indra to defeat Vritra, the asura king? Did not the Fire god hide himself in the waters for the sake of the gods? Does not the sun go out of sight every day? Did not Lord Vishnu, the All-pervading God, descend as the son of Dasaratha and spend long years, suffering many sorrows for the sake of killing Ravana? The greatest souls in the past have sanctified disguise for a good purpose. You will, likewise, conquer your enemies and win prosperity.”

Yudhishthira took leave of the brahmanas and gave the members of his retinue leave to go home. The Pandavas retired to a secluded spot in the forest and discussed their future line of action. Yudhishthira sadly asked Arjuna: "You are well conversant with the ways of the world. Where would it be best for us to spend the thirteenth year?"

Arjuna replied: "O great king, you know Yama, the Lord of Death, has blessed us. We can easily pass the twelve months together without being discovered. There are many charming states for us to choose from for our sojourn—states like Panchala, Matsya, Salva, Videha, Bahlika, Dasharna, Surasena, Kalinga and Magadha. It is, of course, for you to choose, but if I may venture an opinion, the Matsya country of king Virata is the best, prosperous and charming as it is."

Yudhishthira answered: "Virata, the king of Matsya, is very strong and he loves us much. He is of mature judgment and is devoted to the practice of virtue. He will not be won over or frightened by Duryodhana. I agree that it would be best to live incognito in Virata's kingdom."

Arjuna said: "Well then, O king, what work would you seek in the court of Virata?"

When he asked this question, Arjuna was full of sorrow at the thought of Yudhishthira, the great and guileless king, who had performed the Rajasuya sacrifice, having to disguise himself and take service.

Yudhishthira answered: "I am thinking of asking Virata to take me in his service as a courtier. I could delight him with my conversation and my dexterity at dice. I shall take the garb of a sanyasin and shall keep him agreeably engaged by my skill in reading omens and knowledge of astrology as well as of the Vedas, Vedangas, ethics, politics and other sciences. I shall have to be careful of course, but be not anxious about me. I shall tell him that I was an intimate friend of Yudhishthira and learnt these things while I was privileged to be with him. O Bhima, what work will you, who conquered and slew Baka and Hidimba, take up under Virata? You saved us by killing Jatasura. Valour and strength are over-flowing from you. What disguise can hide your mighty personality and enable you to live unknown in the country of Mastya?" Yudhishthira was in tears as he put this question to Bhima.

Bhima laughingly replied: "O king, I think of taking service as a cook in the court of Virata. You know that I have a great appetite and that I am also an expert in cooking. I shall please Virata by preparing such dainty food as he has never tasted. I shall hew the trees of the forest and bring heaps of fuel. I shall also delight the king by contending with and defeating the wrestlers who come to his court.

This made Yudhishthira anxious for he feared that danger might befall them if Bhima engaged himself in wrestling bouts. At once Bhima spoke thus to calm his fears:

"I shall not kill anyone. I may give a bad jolt to any wrestler who deserves it but I shall not kill anyone. I shall restrain mad bulls, buffaloes and other wild animals and thus entertain king Virata."

Afterwards Yudhishthira addressed Arjuna: "What profession do you propose to take up? How can you hide your towering valour?" When he asked this question Yudhishthira could not restrain himself from narrating the brilliant exploits of Arjuna. He spoke of his brother's glory in twenty verses. Well, who deserves praise if not Arjuna?

Arjuna replied: "Revered brother, I shall hide myself in the guise of a eunuch and serve the ladies of the court. I shall hide under a jacket the scars on my arms made by the constant chafing of the bow-string. When I rejected Urvasi's amorous overtures on the ground that she was like a mother unto me, she cursed me with loss of manhood; but through Indra's grace the curse would hold good only for a year, and the time would be mine to choose. I shall serve out that year of loss of manhood now. Wearing bangles made of white conchs, braiding my hair like a woman, and clothing myself in female attire, I shall engage myself in menial work in the inner apartments of Virata's queen. I shall teach the women singing and dancing. And I shall seek service saying that I used to serve Draupadi in Yudhishthira's court." Saying this, Arjuna turned to Draupadi and smiled.

Yudhishthira was in tears. "Alas! Have the fates decreed that he, who is the equal of Sri Krishna himself in fame and valour, a scion of Bharata's line, who stands high like the great golden mount Meru, must go and seek employment of Virata as a eunuch in the queen's inner apartments?" he said brokenly.

Yudhishthira then turned to Nakula and asked him what work he would engage in and, as he thought of Madri, the mother of Nakula, tears rolled down his eyes.

Nakula replied: "I shall work in King Virata's stables. My mind delights in training and looking after horses, for I know the heart of horses and have knowledge of their ailments and cure. I can not only ride and break horses but also harness and drive them in a chariot. I shall say that I had looked after the horses of the Pandavas and I have no doubt Virata will take me in his service."

Yudhishthira asked Sahadeva: "You, with the intelligence of Brihaspati, the priest and the preceptor of the gods, and the knowledge of Sukra, the teacher of the asuras, what work will you take up?"

Sahadeva replied: "Let Nakula look after horses. I shall tend the cows. I shall guard Virata's cattle from the ravages of disease and the attacks of wild beasts."

"O Draupadi,"—but Yudhishthira could not find words to ask her what she proposed to do. She was dearer to him than life itself, worthy of all reverence and protection,—and it seemed sacrilege to talk of service. She was a princess, the daughter of a king, nobly born, tenderly nurtured. Yudhishthira felt choked by shame and despair.

Draupadi saw his grief and spoke these brave words: "O best of kings, do not grieve or suffer anxiety on my account. I shall be a *sairandhri* in the court of the queen of Virata—the companion and attendant of the princess. I shall preserve my freedom and chastity, for the attendant and companion of a princess has this right and can exercise it. I shall pass my days in such light tasks as braiding the hair and entertaining the women of the court with small talk. I shall represent that I had thus served princess Draupadi in Yudhishthira's court and seek employment from the queen. Thus shall I remain unknown to others."

Yudhishthira praised Draupadi's courage and said: "O auspicious one, you speak as befits one of your family."

When the Pandavas thus decided, Dhaumya blessed them and advised them thus: "Those who are engaged in service under a king should always be vigilant. They must serve without talking too much. They may give their counsel only when asked, and never obtrude it. They should praise the king on befitting occasions. All things, no matter how small, may be done only after informing the king, who is a veritable fire in human form. Do not go too near him, nor yet appear to avoid him. Even though a person may be trusted by the king and have great authority, still he should always behave as if he would be dismissed immediately. It would be foolishness to place too much confidence in a king. One may not sit in the conveyance, seat or chariot of the king, presuming on his affection. A servant of the king should ever be active and self-restrained. He should not be excessively elated, nor unduly depressed, by being honoured or dishonoured by the king.

"He may not reveal the secrets confided to him, nor may he receive anything in the form of gift from the citizens. He should not be jealous of other servants. The king may place fools in positions of authority, leaving aside the wise. Such waywardness should be ignored. One cannot be too careful with the ladies of the court. There should not be the faintest suggestion of indelicacy in one's conduct towards them." Dhaumya then blessed the Pandavas: "Live thus in patience for one year, serving the king Virata, and then, you will pass the rest of your days in happiness, regaining your lost throne."

CHAPTER XLIII

VIRTUE VINDICATED

YUDHISHTHIRA put on the garb of a sanyasin. Arjuna transformed himself into a eunuch. Others also disguised themselves but no disguise could take away their natural charm, grace and nobility of mien. When they went to King Virata seeking service, they seemed to him born to command and rule rather than to serve, and he hesitated, at first, to engage them in service but yielding to their urgent solicitations, he finally appointed them to the places they sought of him.

Yudhishthira became the king's companion and spent his days in playing dice with him. Bhima worked as the chief of the cooks. He also enterained the king by wrestling with the reputed men of might who came to the court, and by controlling wild animals.

Arjuna assumed the name of Brihannala and taught dancing, singing and instrumental music to Princess Uttara, the daughter of Virata, and the ladies. Nakula looked after the horses and Sahadeva looked after the cows and the bulls.

The princess Draupadi who, if fate had been less cruel, should herself have been served by many maids, had now to pass her days in serving Sudeshna, Virata's queen. She lived in the inner apartments of the palace as maid and companion, engaging herself in uncongenial tasks.

Kichaka, the brother of Sudeshna, was the commander-in-chief of Virata's army and it was to him that the old king Virata owed his power and prestige. Kichaka wielded such vast influence that people used to say that Kichaka was the real king of the Matsya country and old Virata king only in name.

Kichaka was inordinately vain of his strength and his influence over the king. He was so smitten with Draupadi's beauty that he conceived an uncontrollable passion for her and he was so sure of his own attractions and power that it never occurred to him that she, though a mere maid-servant, could resist his will. He made amorous overtures to her which greatly vexed her.

Draupadi was too shy to speak of this to Sudeshna or to others. She gave out that her husbands were gandharvas who would mysteriously kill those who tried to dishonour her. Her good conduct and lustre made everyone believe in her story about the gandharvas, but Kichaka was not to be frightened so easily and he sought persistently to seduce Draupadi. His persecution became so intolerable that at last she complained of it to Queen Sudeshna, and implored her protection.

Kichaka, of course, had greater influence over his sister, and he shamelessly confided to her his unlawful passion for her maid and sought her aid to compass his wish. He represented himself as dying of desire. "I am so full of torment," he said, "that from the time I met your maid, I do not get any sleep or rest. You must save my life by managing somehow to make her receive my advances favourably."

The queen tried to dissuade him but Kichaka would not listen; and finally Sudeshna yielded. Both of them decided upon a plan to entrap Draupadi.

One night, many sweetmeats and intoxicating drinks were prepared in the house of Kichaka and a great feast was arranged. Sudeshna called Sairandhri to her side and handing her a beautiful golden jug bade her go and bring her a jug of wine from Kichaka's house.

Draupadi hesitated to go to the house of the infatuated Kichaka at that hour and begged hard that someone else of her many attendants might be sent, but Sudeshna did not listen but pretended to be angry and said sharply: "Go, you must. I cannot send anyone else," and poor Draupadi had to obey.

Draupadi's fears were justified. When she reached Kichaka's house, that wretch, maddened with lust and wine, began to pester her with urgent entreaties and solicitations.

She rejected his prayers and said: "Why do you, who belong to a noble royal family, seek me, born of a low caste? Why do you take to the wrong path? Why do you approach me, a married lady? You will perish. My protectors, the gandharvas, will kill you in their anger."

When Draupadi would not yield to his entreaties, Kichaka seized her by the arm and pulled her about but putting down the vessel she carried, she wrenched herself free and fled, hotly pursued by the maddened Kichaka. She fled to the court wailing loudly, but even there, intoxicated not only with wine, but even more by his power and influence, Kichaka followed her and kicked her in the presence of all with abusive words. Everyone was afraid of the all-powerful commander-in-chief and no one was bold enough to oppose him.

Draupadi could not bear the sorrow and anger she felt at the thought of her helplessness under the intolerable insult offered to her. Her deep distress made her forget the danger that would befall the Pandavas if they were discovered prematurely. She went that night to Bhima and waking him up, gave vent to her agonised sense of wrong. After telling him how brutally Kichaka had pursued and insulted her, she appealed piteously to Bhima for protection and revenge. She said in a voice choked with sobs:

"I cannot bear this any longer. You must kill this wretch at once. For your sake, to help you keep your promise, I serve in a menial office and even prepare sandal paste for Virata. I have not minded it---I, who have till now served only you or Mother Kunti, whom I love and honour. But now, I have to serve these wretches, fearful every moment of some disgraceful outrage. Not that I mind hard work—see my hands." And she showed her hands which were cracked and stained with menial tasks. Bhima respectfully carried her hands to his face and eyes—and speechless with sorrow and pity and love, he dried her tears. Finally he found his voice, and said thickly:

"I care not for the promise of Yudhishthira or the advice of Arjuna; I care not what may happen but I will do as you say. I will kill Kichaka and his gang here and now!" and he rose.

But Draupadi warned Bhima not to be hasty. They talked it over and finally decided that Kichaka should be beguiled to come alone at night to a retired spot in the dancing hall where he should find waiting for him Bhima disguised as a woman, instead of Draupadi.

Next morning, Kichaka renewed his hateful attentions and vain-gloriously said to Draupadi: "O Sairandhri, I threw you down and kicked you in the presence of the king. Did any one there come forward to help you? Virata is only king in name of this Matsya country, but I, the commander-in-chief, am the real sovereign. Now, do not be a fool, but come and enjoy life with me, with all royal honours, I shall be your devoted servant." And he begged and bullied and cringed, devouring her the while with lust-reddened eyes.

Draupadi pretended to yield and said: "Kichaka, believe me, I can no longer resist your solicitations. But none of your companions or brothers should know of our relations. If you swear that you will faithfully keep the secret from others, I shall yield to your wish."

Kichaka delightedly agreed to the condition and he promised to go alone to a place of assignation that very night.

She said: "The women have their dancing lessons during daytime in the dancing hall and return to their own quarters at nightfall. None will be in the dancing hall at night. Come there tonight. I shall be waiting for you there. You can have your will of me."

Kichaka revelled in happiness.

That night, Kichaka took his bath, perfumed and decked himself, went to the dancing hall and finding with joy that the doors were open, gently entered the place.

In the very dim light, he saw someone lying there on a couch, no doubt Sairandhri. He groped his way in the dark, and gently laid his hands on the person of the sleeper. Alas! It was not the soft form of Sairandhri that he touched but the iron frame of Bhima who lept forth on him like a lion on its prey and hurled him to the ground. But surprised as he was, Kichaka was no coward, and he was now fighting for dear life. Grimly they wrestled, Kichaka no doubt thinking he had to do with one of the gandharva husbands. They were not ill-matched, for at that time Bhima, Balarama and Kichaka were reputed to be in the same class in strength and wrestling skill. The struggle between Bhima and Kichaka was like that between Vali and Sugriva.

In the end Bhima killed Kichaka, pounding and kneading his body into a shapeless lump of flesh. Then he gave the glad news of Kichaka's punishment to Draupadi and went in haste to his kitchen, bathed, rubbed sandal paste over his body and slept with satisfaction.

Draupadi awoke the guards of the court and said to them: "Kichaka came to molest me, but as I had warned him, the gandharvas, my husbands, made short work of him. Your commander-in-chief, who fell a prey to lust, has been killed. Look at him." And she showed them the corpse of Kichaka which had been reduced to such a shapeless mass that it had no human semblance.

CHAPTER XLIV

MATSYA DEFENDED

THE fate of Kichaka made Draupadi an object of fear to the people of Virata. "This woman, so beautiful that she captures all hearts, is as dangerous as she is lovely, for the gandharvas guard her. She is a great danger to the people of the city and the members of the royal household, for the gandharvas may stop at nothing in their jealous anger. It would be best to send her out of the city." Reflecting thus, the citizens went to Sudeshna and prayed to her to expel Draupadi.

Sudeshna told Draupadi: "You are, no doubt, a very virtuous lady, but kindly leave our city. I have had enough of you."

There was only one month more to complete the stipulated period of living incognito and Draupadi begged earnestly to be permitted to stay just another month by when, she said, her gandharva husbands would have realised their objects and would be ready to take her away with them. The gandharvas would be very grateful to King Virata and his kingdom. Whethe grateful or not, the gandharvas could be deadly if irritated and Sudeshna was too afraid of Draupadi to refuse her request.

From the beginning of the thirteenth year, the spies of Duryodhana, under his express orders, had searched for the Pandavas in all possible places of hiding. After several months of futile search, they reported their failure to Duryodhana and added that probably the Pandavas had perished of privations. Then came the news that the powerful Kichaka had been killed in single combat by some gandharva on account of a woman. There were only two persons who could kill Kichaka, and Bhima was one of them, and so they suspected that Bhima might have been the vengeful gandharva who had killed Kichaka; and Duryodhana also felt that the lady who was the cause of the killing might be Draupadi. He expressed his doubts in the open assembly.

He said: "I suspect that the Pandavas are in Virata's city. Now, he is one of the kings who are too stiff-necked to court our friendship. It would be a good thing to invade his country and carry away his cows. If the Pandavas are hiding there, they will certainly come out to fight with us to repay Virata's hospitality and we can surely spot them. If we discover them before the stipulated time, they will have to go to the forest again for another twelve years. If, on the other hand, the Pandavas are not there, there is nothing lost."

King Susarma, the ruler of Trigarta, heartily supported him. "The king of Matsya is my enemy," he said, "and Kichaka has given me a lot of trouble. Kichaka's death must have weakened Virata considerably. Give me leave to attack Virata now."

Karna seconded this proposition. They unanimously came to the decision that Susarma should attack Matsya from the south and draw off the army of Virata to the south for defence. Duryodhana, with the Kaurava army, would then launch a surprise attack on Virata from the northern side which would be relatively undefended.

Susarma invaded Matsya from the south, seized the cattle and laid waste the gardens and fields on the way. The cowherds ran in great distress to Virata, who now very much wished that Kichaka was alive, for he surely would have made short work of the raiders. When he said so to Kanka (the assumed name by which Yudhishthira was known in Virata's court) the latter said: "O king, be not worried. Even though I am a hermit, I am an expert in warfare. I shall put on armour and go in a chariot and drive away your enemies. Please instruct that your cook Valala, your stable-keeper Dharmagranthi and your cowherd Tantripala may also get into chariots and help us. I have heard that they are great fighters. Kindly give orders that the neessary chariots and the weapons may be given to us."

Delighted, Virata was only too willing to accept the offer. The chariots were ready. All the Pandavas excepting Arjuna went out with the army of Virata to oppose Susarma and his men. A fierce fight ensued between the armies of Virata and Susarma, with much loss of life on both sides. Susarma attacked Virata and surrounded his chariot, compelling him to get down and fight on foot. Susarma captured Virata and held him captive in his chariot. With the capture of Virata, the army of Matsya lost heart and began to scatter in all directions, when Yudhishthira commanded Bhima to attack Susarma and release Virata and rally the scattered Matsya forces.

At these words of Yudhishthira, Bhima was about to uproot a tree, but Yudhishthira stopped him and said: "No such tricks, please, and no battle cry—or your identity will be revealed. Fight like anybody else from the chariot with your bows and arrows."

Bhima accordingly got into the chariot, attacked the enemy, set Virata free and captured Susarma. The dispersed forces of Matsya rallied into new formations, charged and defeated the army of Susarma.

As soon as the news of Susarma's defeat reached the city, the people were extremely jubilant. They decorated the city and went forth to welcome their victorious king back home.

When they were thus making preparations to receive king Virata, the big army of Duryodhana came down on them from the north, and began despoiling the cattle ranches on the outskirts of the city. The Kaurava army marched in force and rounded up the countless cows that were there. The leader of the cowherds ran to the city and said to the prince Uttara: "O prince, the Kauravas are marching on, robbing us of our cows. King Virata has gone south to fight against the Trigarta. We are in consternation as there is no one to protect us. You are the king's son and we look to you for protection. Pray, come and recover the cows for the honour of your family."

When the leader of the cowherds made this complaint to Uttara in the presence of the people and especially of the women of the palace, the prince felt flushed with valour and proudly said: "If only I can get someone to be my charioteer I will recover the cows single-handed. Well, my feats of arms will be worth seeing—and people will know there is little to choose between Arjuna and myself."

When Uttara said these words Draupadi was in the inner apartments and must have laughed within herself. She ran to princess Uttara and said: "O princess, great danger has befallen the country. The cowherds have complained to the young prince that the Kaurava army is advancing on our city from the north and has captured cattle ranches and cows on the outskirts. The prince is eager to fight them and is in need of a charioteer. Should such a small thing as that stand in the way of victory and glory? I tell you what. Brihannala has been Arjuna's charioteer. When I was in the service of the queen of the Pandavas, I heard of this fact and I also know that Brihannala learnt archery from Arjuna. Order Brihannala immediately to go and drive the prince's chariot."

The princess ran to her brother and said: "I learn from Sairandhri who has served in the Pandava court, that Brihannala is an expert charioteer and has actually been a charioteer to Arjuna, the Pandava hero. Take him, go forth to save us and cover yourself with glory."

The prince agreed and at once the princess ran to the dancing hall and informed Brihannala (Arjuna in disguise) that her services were required as charioteer.

She said: "The Kauravas are going away with the wealth and the cows of my father. These wicked men have come, taking advantage of the king's absence. Sairandhri says that you have been Arjuna's charioteer and have acquired dexterity in warfare. Go and drive the prince's chariot—be not afraid, the prince will protect you!"

Hiding a smile and with a proper show of hesitation and diffidence, Arjuna assented. He also pretended to be unfamiliar with armour and raised a laugh at his awkwardness in wearing it. The women of the palace laughed at his fears and told him again not to be afraid for Uttara would look after him. Arjuna spent some time in such fun but, when he harnessed the horses, it could be seen that, at least, he was an expert charioteer, and when he held the reins, the horses seemed to love and obey him.

"The prince will be victorious. We shall despoil the enemy of their embroidered robes and distribute them to you as the prize of victory" were the last words of Brihannala to the women of the palace, as the chariot rapidly bore the prince outwards to battle.

CHAPTER XLV

PRINCE UTTARA

UTTARA, the son of Virata, set off with enthusiasm from the city in his chariot with Birhannala as his charioteer and commanded the latter to drive quickly to the place where the Kauravas had rounded up the cows.

Nothing loth, the horses were put to their best speed, and presently the Kaurava army was sighted, at first a gleaming line, enveloped in a cloud of dust that seemed to go up to the skies. Going nearer, Uttara saw the great army drawn in battle by Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Duryodhana and Karna. At that sight, his courage, which had been gradually drying up during the rapid rush to the field, was quite gone; his mouth went dry and his hair stood on end. His limbs were all in a tremble. He shut his eyes with both his hands to keep out the fearsome sight.

He said: "How can I, single-handed, attack an army? I have no troops, since the king, my father, has taken all available forces, leaving the city unprotected. It is absurd to think that one man can alone fight a well-equipped army, led by world-renowned warrior! Oh Brihannala, turn back the chariot."

Brihannala laughed and said: "O prince, you started from the city, full of fierce determination and the ladies expect great things of you. The citizens also have put their trust in you. Sairandhri praised me and I have come at your request. If we return without recovering the cows, we shall become the laughing-stock of all. I will not turn back the chariot. Let us stand firm and fight. Have no fear." With these words Brihannala began to drive the chariot towards the enemy and they approached quite close to them. Uttara's distress was pitiable. He said in a quaking voice: "I cannot do it, I simply cannot. Let the Kauravas march off with the cows and if the women laugh, let them; I do not care. What sense is there in fighting people who are immeasurably stronger than we? Do not be a fool! Turn back the chariot. Otherwise, I shall jump out and walk back." With these words Uttara cast off his bows and arrows, got down from the chariot and began to fly towards the city, mad with panic.

This should not be taken as something that has never happened in life, nor is Uttara's panic during his first battle, by any means, singular. Fear is a strong instinctive feeling, though it can be overcome by will-power or strong motives like love, shame or hate, or more usually, by discipline. Even men who have afterwards distinguished themselves by heroic deeds have confessed to having felt something like panic fear, the first time they came under fire. Uttara was by no means an exceptional coward, for he fought and fell gallantly at Kurukshetra.

Arjuna pursued the running prince, shouting to him to stop and behave like a kshatriya. The braided hair of the charioteer began to dance and his clothes began to wave as he ran in pursuit of Uttara. The prince fled hither and thither, trying to dodge the hands that would stop him. Those of the Kaurava army, who could see this spectacle found it amusing.

Drona was puzzled at the sight of Brihannala who, albeit dressed fantastically, seemed a man rigged out as a woman and to remind him curiously of Arjuna. When he remarked about this, Karna said: "How can this be Arjuna? What does it matter even if he is? What can Arjuna alone do against us in the absence of the other Pandavas? The king has left his son alone in the city and gone with his whole army to fight against Susarma. The young prince has brought the attendant of the ladies of the palace as his charioteer. That is all."

Poor Uttara was imploring Brihannala to let him go, promising untold wealth if he did so. He appealed to his pity: "I am the only son of my mother. I am a child grown up on my mother's lap. I am full of fear."

But, Brihannala wanted to save him from himself, and would not let him go. He pursued him, seized him and dragged him to the chariot by force.

Uttara began to sob and said: "What a fool I was to brag! Alas! What will happen to me?"

Arjuna said kindly, soothing the prince's fears: "Be not afraid. I shall fight with the Kauravas. Help me by looking after the horses and driving the chariot, and I shall do the rest. Believe me, no good ever came of flight. We will rout the enemy and recover your cows. You will have all the glory." With these words Arjuna lifted the prince on to the chariot and, putting the reins in his hands, asked him to drive towards a tree near the burial ground.

Drona who was watching all this intently, knew that the fantastically-dressed charioteer was Arjuna and shared his knowledge with Bhishma. Duryodhana turned to Karna and said: "Why should we worry who he is? Even if he is Arjuna, he will be only playing into our hands, for his being discovered will send the Pandavas to the forest for another twelve years."

As soon as they came near the tree Brihannala bade the prince get down, climb the tree and take down the arms hidden there.

The prince said in alarm and grief: "People say that what hangs on this tree is the corpse of an old huntress. How can I touch a dead body? How can you ask me to do such a thing?"

Arjuna said: "It is not a corpse, prince: I know that it contains the weapons of the Pandavas. Climb up the tree bravely and bring them down. Do not delay."

Seeing that resistance was of no avail Uttara climbed up the tree as Brihannala had asked him to and took, in great disgust, the bag tied up there and came down. When the leather bag was opened, he saw weapons as bright as the sun.

Uttara stood amazed at the sight of the gleaming weapons and covered his eyes. He mustered courage and touched them. The touch seemed to send a stream of hope and high courage into him.

He asked with ardour: "O charioteer, what a wonder! You say that these bows, arrows and swords belong to the Pandavas. They have been deprived of their kingdom and they have retired to the forest. Do you know them? Where are they?"

Then Arjuna told him briefly how they were all in Virata's court. He said: "Kanka, who serves the king, is Yudhishthira. Valala, the cook who prepares such nice dishes for your father, is none other than Bhima. Sairandhri, for insulting whom Kichaka was killed, is Draupadi. Dharmagranthi, who looks after the horses and Tantripala, the keeper of the cows, are Nakula and Sahadeva respectively. I am Arjuna. Be not afraid. O prince, you will soon see me defeat the Kauravas even in the sight of Bhishma, Drona and Aswatthama and recover the cows. You will also gain renown and it will be a lesson to you."

Then Uttara folded his hands and said: "O Arjuna, how fortunate I am to see you with my own eyes! So, Arjuna is the victorious hero whose very contact has put heart and courage into me. Forgive the wrongs I have done through ignorance."

As they approached the Kaurava host, Arjuna recounted some of his heroic deeds, so that Uttara might not lose grip of his newly awakened courage. Arriving in front of the Kauravas, he got down, prayed to God, removed the conch-bangles from his hands and put on leather gauntlets. He then tied a cloth on his flowing hair, stood facing the east, meditated on his armour, got into the chariot and gloried in the familiar feel of his famous Gandiva bow. He stringed it and thrice twanged the string whose shrill note raised an echo from all sides. Hearing the sound, the heroes of the Kaurava army said to one another: "This surely is Gandiva's voice." When Arjuna stood on the chariot in all his godlike stature and blew his conch *Devadatta,* the Kaurava army was alarmed and a frenzied shout arose that the Pandavas had come.

The story of Uttara, who spoke boastfully in the ladies' boudoirs and fled in panic at the sight of the hostile array, has not been introduced in the Mahabharata, merely as a comic interlude.

It is in ordinary human nature to look with contempt on lower levels of conduct in ability. The rich scorn the poor; the beautiful, the plain; the strong, the weak. Brave men despise cowards. But, Arjuna was no ordinary man but a great soul and a true hero who felt that his duty as a strong, brave man was to help others to rise above their weakness. Knowing that nature had endowed him with courage and bravery at birth, and that he owed them to no special exertions on his part, he had the true humility of the really great and he did what he could to put courage into Uttara and make him worthy of his lineage.

This was Arjuna's characteristic nobility. He never abused his strength and power. One of his many names is Bibhatsu, which means one who shrank from doing an unworthy act, and he lived up to it.

CHAPTER XLVI

PROMISE FULFILLED

THE chariot of Arjuna thundered on its way, seeming to shake the earth. The hearts of the Kauravas quaked when they heard the twang of the Gandiva bow.

"Our army must be arrayed well and with care. Arjuna has come," said Drona anxiously.

Duryodhana did not at all like the honour Drona did Arjuna by this anxiety. He said to Karna: "The Pandavas' pledge was that they would spend twelve years in the forest and the following year undiscovered. The thirteenth year has not ended yet. Arjuna has revealed himself before the time. Why then should we give way to fear? The Pandavas will have to go again to the forest for another twelve years. Drona is suffering from the cold feet of the too learned. Let us leave him in the rear and advance to the battle."

Karna assented and said: "Our soldiers' heart is not in the fight and they are trembling with fear. They say that the man, who stands so proudly, bow in hand, on the chariot, speeding towards us, is Arjuna. But why need we fear even if it be Parasurama? I will myself stop the advancing warrior and redeem my word to you, and fight him, aye, even if all the others stand back. They may drive away the cows of the Matsya king while, singlehanded, I shall give them cover, engaging Arjuna in battle," and Karna, as usual, began to blow his own trumpet.

When Kripa heard these words of Karna, he said: "This is pure tomfoolery. We must all make a combined attack on Arjuna. That would be our one chance of success. Do not, therefore, brag about your opposing him alone and unaided."

Karna grew angry. He said: "The acharya ever delights in singing Arjuna's praises and in magnifying his prowess. Whether he does so from fear or excessive fondness for the Pandavas, I do not know. Those, who are afraid, need not fight, but may simply look on, while others, who are true to the salt they have eaten, engage in battle. I, for one, a mere soldier who loves my friends and hates my enemies, will stand here and fight. What business have men learned in the Vedas, who love and praise their enemies, got here?" said he sneeringly.

Aswatthama, Drona's son and Kripa's nephew, could not hear unmoved this sneer at the venerable teachers. He said sternly to Karna: "We have not yet taken the king back to Hastinapura, and the battle is yet to be won. Your brag is idle vainglory. It may be that we are not kshatriyas and that we belong to the class that recites the Vedas and the sastras, but I have not been able to find in any sastra that it is honourable for kings to seize kingdoms by cheating at dice. Even those, who fight and conquer kingdoms, do not crow too loudly about it, and I cannot see what you have done to be proud of. The fire is silent and yet cooks the food. The sun shines but not on himself. Likewise, Mother earth sustains all things, movable and immovable, and supports her burden without so much as a whisper. What claim to praise has a kshatriya who has unlawfully seized another's kingdom at a game of dice? To have cheated the Pandavas of their kingdom is no more a matter of glory than to have spread traps for unsuspecting birds. O Duryodhana, O Karna, in what battle did your heroes defeat the Pandavas? You dragged Draupadi to the assembly. Are you proud of it? You have destroyed the Kaurava race like an empty-headed clod who fells a big sandal tree for love of its fragrance. A fight with Arjuna, you will find, is a very different thing from a throw of the dice. The Gandiva will send forth sharp arrows and not fours and twos as in the game of dice. Vain fools, do you think that Sakuni can, by mere cheating, sneak a victory in battle for you?"

The leaders of the Kaurava army lost their patience and began a loud wordy warfare. Seeing this, the grandsire was filled with sorrow and said:

"The wise man does not insult his teachers. One should engage in battle only after a careful calculation of time, place and circumstance. Even wise people often lose their balance and good sense over their own affairs. Ruffled by anger, even the usually so sensible Duryodhana fails to recognise that the warrior who stands braving our army is Arjuna. His intellect has been clouded by anger. O Aswatthama, pray do not mind Karna's offensive remarks. You must take them as intended merely to put the preceptors on their mettle and sting them into action. This is not the time to nurse enmity or sow dissension. Drona, Kripa and Aswatthama should forget and forgive. Where can the Kauravas find in the whole world, heroes superior to Drona, the preceptor, and his son Aswatthama, who combine in themselves Vedic scholarship and kshatriya heroism? We know of none other than Parasurama who can equal Drona. We can conquer Arjuna only if we all join together and fight him. Let us address ourselves to the task before us. If we quarrel amongst ourselves we cannot fight Arjuna."

Thus spoke the grandsire. Soothed by his noble words, angry feelings subsided.

Bhishma turned to Duryodhana and continued: "Best of kings, Arjuna has come. The stipulated period of thirteen years terminated yesterday. Your calculation is wrong, as men learned in the science of planetary movements will tell you. I knew that the period had ended when Arjuna blew his conch. Reflect a little before deciding on war. If you wish to make peace with the Pandavas, now is the time for it. What do you seek, a just and honourable peace or a mutually destructive war? Ponder well and make your choice."

Duryodhana replied: "Revered sire, I have no wish for peace. I shall not give even a village to the Pandavas. Let us get ready for war."

Then Drona said: "Let prince Duryodhana take away a fourth of the army to guard him and return to Hastinapura. Let another surround the cows and seize them. If we return without seizing the cows it would amount to an acknowledgment of defeat. With the rest of the army, the five of us will give battle to Arjuna."

The Kaurava forces ranged themselves accordingly in battle array.

Arjuna said: "O Uttara, I do not see Duryodhana's chariot or Duryodhana. I see Bhishma standing, clad in armour. I think Duryodhana is driving away the cows to Hastinapura; let us pursue him and recover the cows." With these words Arjuna moved away from the Kaurava army and went after Duryodhana and the cows. And as he was going, he respectfully greeted his teachers and the old grandsire, by drawing his Gandiva bow and sending arrows so as to fall near their feet. Reverently saluting them in this heroic fashion, he left them and pursued Duryodhana.

Arjuna reached the place where the cows were gathered and put to rout the marauding forces. He then turned to the cowherds and asked them to take the cows to the byres, which they did with great rejoicing. Arjuna then pursued Duryodhana.

Seeing this, Bhishma and the other Kaurava warriors rushed to the rescue and, surrounding Arjuna, sent forth arrows against him. Arjuna carried on a wonderful fight. First, he made at Karna and drove him from the battlefield. After that, he attacked and defeated Drona. Seeing Drona standing spent with fatigue, Aswatthama joined in the fight and attacked Arjuna, which gave Arjuna an opportunity of letting Drona withdraw from the field. Then, there ensued a bitter struggle between Aswatthama and Arjuna. When Aswatthama grew weary, Kripa relieved him and maintained the attack against Arjuna. But Kripa also sustained defeat and the whole army was routed and fled in fear. Though rallied and brought back to the attack by Bhishma, Drona and others, there was no fight left in them, and finally, they left the field, after a glorious fight between Bhishma and Arjuna, which, it is said, the gods themselves came to see.

The attempt to head off Arjuna's pursuit of Duryodhana thus failed and soon Arjuna came up with Duryodhana and strongly attacked him. Duryodhana was defeated and fled from the battlefield, but not far, because, when Arjuna taunted him with cowardice, he turned round like a serpent and resumed the fight. Bhishma and others surrounded and protected him. Arjuna fought and finally, he employed a magic weapon which made them all fall down unconscious on the battlefield. While they were in that condition he snatched away their garments. The seizure of the clothes of the enemy was the sign of decisive victory in those days.

When Duryodhana came, Bhishma sent him back to the city. The whole army returned to Hastinapura after this humiliating defeat.

Arjuna said: "O Uttara, turn back the horses. Our cows have been regained. Our enemies have fled. O prince, return to your kingdom, adorning your person with sandal paste and decked with flowers." On the way back, Arjuna deposited the weapons as before on the tree and dressed himself once more as Brihannala. He sent messengers in advance to proclaim in the city that Uttara had won a glorious victory.

CHAPTER XLVII

VIRATA'S DELUSION

AFTER defeating Susarma, king of Trigarta, Virata returned to his capital amidst the acclamations of the citizens. When he reached his palace, he saw that Uttara was not there and the womenfolk told him with much elation that Uttara had set out to conquer the Kauravas. They had not a doubt that their handsome prince could conquer the whole world; but the king's heart sank within him at the news, for he knew the impossible task which the delicately nurtured prince had taken on himself with no better following than a eunuch. "My dearly loved son must be dead by now," he cried, overwhelmed with anguish.

He then bade his ministers collect and send as strong a force as could be got together for rescuing Uttara if he was still alive and bring him back. Scouts also were immediately despatched to find out Uttara's whereabouts and fate.

Dharmaputra, now disguised as the sanyasin Kanka, tried to comfort Virata by assuring him that the prince could come to no harm, since Brihannala had gone as his charioteer. "You do not know about her," said he. "I do. Whosoever fights from a chariot driven by her, can be sure of victory. Further, the news of Susarma's defeat must have reached there and the Kauravas must have retreated."

Meanwhile courtiers arrived from the field of battle with the glad news that Uttara had defeated the Kaurava forces and recovered the kine. This seemed too good to be true, even to the fond father, but Yudhishthira smilingly reassured him. Said he: "Have no doubts, O king. What the messengers say must be true. When Brihannala went out as charioteer, success was certain. There is nothing extraordinary in your son's victory. I happen to know that even Indra's charioteer or Krishna's cannot equal Brihannala." This seemed absurd to Virata, but he was too happy to resent it. He made large gifts of precious stones and other wealth to the messengers who brought the good news and ordered public rejoicing. "My success over Susarma is nothing," he proclaimed. "The prince's is the real victory Let special prayers of thanksgiving be offered at all places of worship. Let all the principal streets be decorated with flags and the citizens go in procession to strains of triumphal music. Make all arrangements to receive, in a befitting manner, my lion-hearted boy."

Virata sent out ministers, soldiers, and maidens to welcome his son, returning in triumph. When the king retired to his private apartments, he asked Sairandhri to bring the dice. He said to Kanka: "I cannot contain my joy. Come, let us play," and sat down to a game with Yudhishthira.

They talked while they played and naturally, the king was full of his son's greatness and prowess. "See the glory of my son. Bhuminjaya. He has put the famed Kaurava warriors to flight."

"Yes," replied Yudhishthira with a smile. "Your son is indeed fortunate for, without the best of good fortune, how could he have secured Brihannala to drive his chariot?"

Virata was angry at this persistent glorification of Brihannala at the expense of Uttara. "Why do you, again and again, babble about the eunuch?" he cried. "While I am talking about my son's victory, you expatiate on the charioteering skill of the eunuch, as if that were of any significance."

The king's anger only increased when Kanka remonstrated: "I know what I am talking about. Brihannala is no ordinary person. The chariot she drives can never see defeat, and whoever is in it, is sure of success in any undertaking, no matter how difficult."

Now, this perverse flouting could not be borne, and Virata in a passion flung the dice at Yudhishthira's face and followed this up with a blow on Yudhishthira's cheek. Yudhishthira was hurt and blood flowed down his face.

Sairandhri who was near by, wiped the blood with the edge of her garment and squeezed it into a golden cup.

"Why all this fuss? What are you collecting the blood into a cup for?" demanded the angry king, who was still in a passion.

"A Sanyasin's blood may not be split on the ground, O king," replied Sairandhri. "The rains will fail in your land for as many years as there are drops in the blood that is split on the earth. That was why I collected the blood in this cup. I fear you do not know Kanka's greatness."

Meanwhile the gatekeeper announced: "Uttara and Brihannala have arrived. The prince is waiting for an audience with the king." Virata got up excitedly and said: "Ask him in, ask him in." And Yudhishthira whispered to the sentry: "Let Uttara come alone. Brihannala should stay behind."

He did this to prevent a catastrophe, for he knew Arjuna would be unable to control his anger when he saw the injury on his brother's face. He could not bear to see Dharmaputra hurt by anyone except in fair battle.

Uttara entered and paid due homage to his royal father. When he turned to do obeisance to Kanka he was horrified to see his bleeding face, for now he knew that Kanka was the great Yudhishthira.

"O king," he cried, "who was it that caused hurt to this great one?"

Virata looked at his son and said: "Why all this ado about it? I struck him for untimely and envious belittling of you when I was in an ocean of delight at the news of your glorious victory. Each time I mentioned you, this unlucky brahmana extolled your charioteer, the eunuch, and gave the victory to him. It was too silly really, and I am sorry I struck him, but it is not worth talking about."

Uttara was overwhelmed with fear. "Alas! You have done great wrong. Fall at his feet right now, father, and pray for forgiveness or we will be destroyed, root and branch."

Virata, to whom all this was inexplicable, stood with a puzzled frown not knowing what to do, but Uttara was so anxious and importunate that he yielded and bowed to Yudhishthira asking for pardon.

Thereafter, embracing his son and making him sit, Virata said: "My boy, you are truly a hero. I am in a fever of impatience to hear all about it. How did you defeat the Kaurava army? How did you recover the kine?"

Uttara hung his head down. "I conquered no army," he said, "and rescued no cows. All that was the work of a god-prince. He took up our cause, rescued me from destruction, put the Kaurava soldiers to flight and brought the herd back. I did nothing."

The king could hardly believe his ears. "Where is that god-prince?" he asked. "I must see and thank the hero who rescued my son and beat back my foes. I will give my daughter, Uttara, in marriage to him. Go and fetch him in."

"He has disappeared for the time being," replied the prince, "but I think he will come again either today or tomorrow." Uttara spoke thus because Arjuna was indeed a prince of the gods and had also for the time being disappeared in Brihannala.

In Virata's hall of assembly, all the leading citizens had gathered to celebrate the king's victory and the prince's. Kanka, Valala the cook, Brihannala, Tantripala and Dharmagranthi, who were responsible for the victories, arrived also and entering the hall, to the surprise of everyone, sat among the princes unbid. Some explained the conduct by saying that, after all, these humbler folk had rendered invaluable service at a critical time and really deserved recognition.

Virata entered the court. On seeing Kanka sanyasin and the cook and the others seated in places reserved for princes and the nobility the king lost his temper and gave loud vent to his displeasure. When they felt they had enough fun, the Pandavas disclosed their identity to the amazement of all present.

Virata was beside himself with joy to think that it was the Pandava princes and Panchali who had been ministering to him all these days in disguise. He embraced Kanka in exuberant gratitude and made a formal surrender of his kingdom and his all to him, of course immediately receiving them back with thanks. Virata also insisted that he should give his daughter in marriage to Arjuna.

But Arjuna said: "No, that would not be proper, for the princess learnt dancing and music of me. I, as her teacher, am in the position of father to her." He, however, agreed to accept her for his son Abhimanyu.

Meanwhile, envoys arrived from the wicked and treacherous Duryodhana with a message for Yudhishthira. "O son of Kunti," they said, "Duryodhana feels very sorry that owing to the hasty action of Dhananjaya, you have to go back to the woods again. He let himself be recognised before the end of the thirteenth year and so, in accordance with your undertaking, you have to dwell in the forest for another twelve years."

Dharmaputra laughed and said: "Messengers, return quickly to Duryodhana and tell him to make further enquiry. The venerable Bhishma and others learned in the stars will no doubt tell him that full thirteen years had been completed before your forces heard again the twang of Dhananjaya's bow and fled in fear."

CHAPTER XLVIII

TAKING COUNSEL

THE thirteenth year during which the Pandavas had to remain undiscovered came to an end. No longer obliged to be in disguise, they left Virata's capital as Pandavas and settled openly in Upaplavya, another place in Matsya territory. From there, they sent emissaries to summon their friends and relatives.

From Dwaraka came Balarama and Krishna with Arjuna's wife, Subhadra, and her son, Abhimanyu and accompanied by many Yadava warriors. Loud and long was the blare of trumpet-conchs as the Matsya prince and the Pandavas went forth to receive Janardana. Indrasena and many others like him, who had at the beginning of the preceding year left the Pandavas in the forest, rejoined them with their chariots at Upaplavya. The Kasi prince and Saibya ruler arrived with their forces. Drupada, the Panchala prince, was there too with three divisions, bringing with him Sikhandin and Draupadi's sons and her brother Dhrishtadyumna. There were many other princes gathered at Upaplavya, well attached to the Pandavas.

Abhimanyu's marriage to princess Uttara was solemnized according to Vedic rites before that illustrious gathering of friendly heroes. The wedding celebrations over, they met in conclave in Virata's hall of assembly. Krishna sat next to Yudhishthira and Virata, while Balarama and Satyaki were seated beside Drupada. As the bustle died down, all eyes were turned on Krishna, who now rose to speak.

"You all know," said Krishna to the hushed assembly, "the story of the great deceit—how Yudhishthira was cheated at the game-board and deprived of his kingdom and exiled with his brothers and Draupadi to the forest. For thirteen years, the sons of Pandu have patiently borne their trouble in redemption of their pledged word. Ponder well and counsel a course which will be in consonance with dharma and contribute to the glory and welfare of both Pandavas and Kauravas. For, Dharmaputra desires nothing that he cannot justly claim. He wishes nothing but good even to the sons of Dhritarashtra who deceived him and did him grievous wrong. In giving your counsel, bear in mind the fraud and meanness of the Kauravas as well as the honourable magnanimity of the Pandavas. Devise a just and honourable settlement. We do not know what Duryodhana has in his mind. I feel we should send an able and upright emissary to him to persuade him to a peaceful settlement by the restoration of half the kingdom to Yudhishthira."

Balarama then rose to address the gathering.

"You have just heard Krishna," he said. "The solution he propounds is wise and just. I endorse it as good for both Duryodhana and Dharmaputra. If Kunti's sons can get back their kingdom by a peaceful settlement, nothing could be better for them, the Kauravas and for all concerned. Only then will there be happiness and peace in the land. Someone has to go to convey to Duryodhana Yudhishthira's wish for a peaceful settlement and bring an answer from him, a man who has the weight and the ability to bring about peace and good understanding.

"The envoy should get the co-operation of Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, Drona and Vidura, Kripa and Aswatthama and even of Karna and Sakuni if possible, and secure support for Kunti's sons. He should be one who, on no account, would give way to anger. Dharmaputra, with full knowledge of consequences, staked his kingdom and lost it, obstinately disregarding the expostulations of friends. Fully aware that he was no match for the adept Sakuni, he yet played against him. He cannot now complain but can only supplicate for his rights. A fit envoy would be one who is not a war-monger but is dead set, in spite of every difficulty, on achieving a peaceful settlement. Princes, I desire you to approach Duryodhana tactfully and make peace with him. Let us avoid an armed conflict by all the means in our power. Only that which accrues in peace is worthwhile. Out of war, nothing but wrong can issue."

Balarama's position was that Yudhishthira knew what he was doing when he gambled away his kingdom and could not now claim it as of right. The fulfilment of the conditions of exile could only give the Pandavas their personal freedom and not their kingdom, that is to say, they need not serve another term of exile in the forest but it gave them no right to the return of their kingdom. Dharmaputra could only supplicate for the return of what he had lost and not claim it as of right.

Balarama did not relish an armed conflict among scions of the same family and rightly held that war would lead only to disaster.

The poet puts an eternal truth in Balarama's mouth.

Satyaki, the Yadava warrior, who heard Balarama speak thus, could not contain himself. He rose in anger and spoke indignantly:

"Balarama's words do not strike me as in the least degree just. One can, if skilful enough, make out a plausible plea for any case, but not all the skill in the world can convert wrong into right or injustice into justice. I must protest against Balarama's stand which fills me with disgust. Do we not see in one and the same tree, one branch bowed with fruit and another sticking out gaunt and useless? So, of these brothers, Krishna speaks words which breathe the spirit of dharma while Balarama's attitude is unworthy and if you grant—what cannot be doubted—that the Kauravas cheated Yudhishthira of his share of the kingdom—why then, allowing them to keep it is as unjust as confirming a thief in the possession of his booty! Any one, who finds fault with Dharmaputra, does so in cowardly fear of Duryodhana, not for any sound reason. O princes, forgive my harsh speech. Not of his own volition but because the Kauravas pressed and invited him to do so, did the inexpert and unwilling Dharmaputra play with a sharper that game so fraught with disaster. Why should he bow and supplicate before Duryodhana, now that he has fulfilled his pledges? Yudhishthira is not a mendicant and need not beg. He has kept his word and so have his brothers—twelve years in exile in the forest and twelve months thereafter in disguise according to their pledge—and yet, Duryodhana and his associates, most shamelessly and dishonestly, question the performance. I shall defeat these impudent villains in battle and they shall either seek Yudhishthira's pardon or meet their doom. How can a righteous war be wrong in any case? There is no sin in slaying enemies who take up arms and fight. To supplicate before the enemy, is to incur disgrace. If Duryodhana desires war, he can have it and we shall be quite ready for it. Let there be no delay and let us get on with the preparations. Duryodhana is not going to part with territory without a war and it would be folly to waste time."

Drupada's heart was gladdened by Satyaki's resolute words. He rose and said: "Satyaki is right and I support him. Soft words will not bring Duryodhana round to reason. Let us continue our preparations for war and let our friends be warned without loss of time to bring up their forces. Send word instantly to Salya, Dhrishtaketu, Jayatsena and Kekaya. We must, of course, send a suitable envoy to Dhritarashtra; the learned brahmana, who conducts the religious ceremonies in my court, can be sent to Hastinapura with confidence. Instruct him well as to what he should say to Duryodhana and how he should convey the message to Bhishma, Dhritarashtra and Dronacharya."

When Drupada concluded, Vasudeva (Krishna, the son of Vasudeva) rose and addressing Drupada, said:

"What you suggest is practicable and also conforms to the kingly code. Baladeva and I are bound to the Kauravas and the Pandavas with equal ties of affection. We came here for princess Uttara's wedding and will return now to our city. Great are you among the princes of the land, alike in age and wisdom, and entitled to advise us all. Dhritarashtra too holds you in high esteem. Drona and Kripa are your boyhood friends. It is therefore only right that you should instruct the brahmana envoy on his mission of peace. If he fails to persuade Duryodhana out of his error, prepare for the inevitable conflict, my friends, and send word to us."

The conference ended and Krishna left for Dwaraka with his people. The Pandavas and their allies went on with their preparations. Messengers went forth to all the friendly princes who got busy and mobilised their respective armies.

Meanwhile, Duryodhana and his brothers were not idle. They also began preparing for the coming conflict and sent word to their friends to get their contingents ready for war. News of these preparations on both sides soon spread throughout the land: "The constant rapid journeyings back and forth of princes caused a great stir everywhere. The earth shook beneath the heavy tramp of marching legions," says the poet.

It would appear that even in olden days, military preparations were made in much the same way as in our times.

Drupada called in his brahmana and said to him: "You know Duryodhana's bent of mind as well as the qualities of the Pandavas. Go to him as the emissary of the Pandavas. The Kauravas deceived the Pandavas with the connivance of their father Dhritarashtra who would not listen to the sage advice of Vidura. Show the old, weak king, who is misled by his son, the path of dharma and wisdom. You will find in Vidura a great ally in this task. Your mission may lead to differences of opinion among the elder statesmen such as Bhishma, Drona and Kripa as well as among the war-lords and, if this happens, it will be some time before those differences are smoothed out, which will be time gained for the completion of the Pandavas' war preparations. As long as you are in Duryodhana's capital talking of peace, their preparations for war will receive a set-back which is all to the good from the Pandavas' standpoint. If, by a miracle, you are able to come back with good terms of peace, so much the better. I do not expect Duryodhana will agree to a peaceful settlement. Still, to send one on a peace mission will be advantageous to us."

In December 1941, the Japanese were carrying on negotiations with the Americans and, immediately on the breakdown of those talks, took them unawares and attacked Pearl Harbour destroying their naval forces there. Drupada's instructions to the brahmana would show that this was no new technique and that, even in the old days, the same method was followed of carrying on negotiations and even sincerely working for peace, but simultaneously preparing, with unremitting vigour, for outbreak of war and carrying on peace talks with the object of creating dissensions in the enemy's ranks. There is nothing new under the sun!

CHAPTER XLIX

ARJUNA'S CHARIOTEER

HAVING sent Drupada's brahmana to Hastinapura on the peace mission, the Pandavas sent word, at the same time, to the princes likely to favour their cause to collect their forces and hold themselves in readiness for war. To Dwaraka, Arjuna went himself.

Having understood through his spies the turn events were taking, Duryodhana too did not remain idle. Learning that Vasudeva (Krishna) was back in his home city, he sped towards Dwaraka in his chariot, as fast as his swiftest horses could take him. The two of them, Arjuna and Duryodhana, thus reached Dwaraka on the same day.

Krishna was fast asleep. Because they were his close relatives, Arjuna and Duryodhana could go into his bedroom. There, they both waited for Krishna to wake up. Duryodhana, who went in first, seated himself on a decorated throne-chair at the head of the bed, while Arjuna kept standing at its foot with arms folded in respectful posture. When Mahadeva woke up, his eyes fell on Arjuna who stood in front of him and he gave him warm welcome. Turning then to Duryodhana, he welcomed him too and asked them what brought them both to Dwaraka. Duryodhana was the first to speak.

"It looks," said he, "as though war would break out between us soon. If it does, you must support me. Arjuna and I are equally beloved of you. We both claim equally close relationship with you. You cannot say that either of us is nearer to you than the other. I came here before Arjuna. Tradition has it that he who came first should be shown preference. Janardana, you are the greatest among the great; so it is incumbent on you to set an example to others. Confirm with your conduct the traditional dharma and remember that it was I who came first."

To which Purushottama (Krishna) answered: "Son of Dhritarashtra, it may be that you came here first, but it was Kunti's son that I saw immediately on waking up. If you were the first arrival, it was Arjuna who first caught my eye. So, even in this respect, your claims on me are equal and I am therefore bound to render assistance to both sides. In distributing favours, the traditional usage is to begin with the juniormost among the recipients. I would, therefore, offer the choice to Arjuna first. The Narayanas, my tribesmen, are my equals in battle and constitute a host, large and almost invincible. In my distribution of assistance, they will be on one side, and I individually on the other, but I shall wield no weapon and take no part in actual fighting."

Turning to Arjuna he said, "Partha, think it over well. Would you want me, alone and weaponless, or would you prefer the prowess of the Narayanas? Exercise the right to the first choice which custom gives you as the younger man."

Scarcely had Krishna finished when Arjuna said with reverence and without hesitation: "I would be content if you are with us, though you may wield no weapon."

Duryodhana could hardly contain himself for joy at what he thought was Arjuna's imbecile choice. He gladly chose the help of Vasudeva's army and his request was granted. Pleased with the acquisition of a mighty force, Duryodhana went to Baladeva and told him the story. As he finished speaking, the mighty Balarama said: "Duryodhana, they must have told you all I said at the time of the marriage of Virata's daughter. I pleaded your case and urged everything that could be said for you. Often have I told Krishna that we have equal ties with the Kauravas and the Pandavas but my words failed to carry conviction to him. I am helpless. It is impossible for me to side one whom Krishna opposes. I will not help Partha and I cannot support you against Krishna. Duryodhana, you come of an illustrious line which is respected by all the princes of the land. Well, then, if it must be war, bear yourself in accordance with the kshatriya code," said he.

Duryodhana returned to Hastinapura in high spirits saying to himself: "Arjuna has made a fool of himself. The great army of Dwaraka will fight on my side and Balarama's good wishes too are with me. Vasudeva has been left without an army."

"Dhananjaya, why did you choose thus unwisely, preferring me alone and unarmed to my fully equipped and heroic forces?" asked Krishna of Arjuna with a smile, when they were alone. Arjuna answered: "My ambition is to achieve glory even like yours. You have the power and prowess to face all the princes of the land and their hordes in battle single-handed. I too feel I can do it. So, I desire that I should win the battle with you driving my chariot unarmed. I have desired this for long and you have today fulfilled my wish."

Vasudeva smiled again and pronounced this benediction: "Are you trying to compete with me? May you succeed," for he was pleased with Arjuna's decision.

This is the sacred story of how Krishna became Partha's charioteer.

CHAPTER L

SALYA AGAINST HIS NEPHEWS

SALYA, the ruler of Madradesa, was the brother of Madri, the mother of Nakula and Sahadeva. He heard that the Pandavas were camping in the city of Upaplavya and making preparations for war. He collected a very big army and set off towards that city to join the Pandavas. Salya's army was so large that where it halted for rest, the encampment extended over a length of nearly fifteen miles.

News of Salya and his marching forces reached Duryodhana who, deciding that Salya should somehow be persuaded to join his side, instructed his officers to provide him and his great army with all facilities and treat them to sumptuous hospitality. In accordance with Duryodhana's instruction, several beautifully decorated resthouses were erected at several places on the route, at which Salya and his men were treated to wondrous hospitality. Food and drink were lavishly provided. Salya was exceedingly pleased with the attentions paid to him but assumed that all this had been arranged by his nephew, Yudhishthira. Salya's army marched on, the earth shaking beneath their heavy strides. Feeling very pleased with the hospitality, he called the waiting attendants one day and said to them:

"I must reward you all who have treated me and my soldiers with so much love and attention. Please tell Kunti's son that he should let me do this, and bring me his consent."

The servants went and told their master, Duryodhana, this.

Duryodhana, who was all the time moving unobserved with the party waiting on Salya and his soldiers, at once took this opportunity to present himself before Salya, and say how honoured he felt at Salya's acceptance of the Kaurava hospitality. This amazed Salya who till then had no suspicion of the truth, and he was also touched by the chivalry of Duryodhana in lavishing kingly hospitality on a partisan of the Pandavas.

Greatly moved, he exclaimed, "How noble and kind of you! How can I repay you?"

Duryodhana replied: "You and your forces should fight on my side. This is the reward I ask of you."

Salya was stunned.

The Puranas wherein right conduct is always preached, sometimes set out stories in which conduct, not in conformity with Dharma, seems condoned. Is it right, one may ask, for religious books thus to seem to justify wrong?

A little reflection will enable one to see the matter in proper light. It is necessary to bring home the fact that even wise, good and great men are liable to fall into error. That is why the Puranas, although ever seeking to instil Dharma, contain narratives to show how in this world even good people sometimes sin against Dharma, as though irresistibly driven to do so. This is to press home the truth that howsoever learned one may be, humility and constant vigilance are absolutely necessary if one wishes to avoid evil.

Why indeed, did the great authors of our epics write about the lapses of Rama in the Ramayana and Yudhishthira in the Mahabharata? Where was the need to make mention of them and then labour arguments to explain them away, thereby disturbing men's minds? It was not as though others had discovered the lapses and Vyasa and Valmiki had to defend their heroes. The stories are artistic creations in which lapses themselves impress the desired moral. The parts dealing with the lapses deeply distress the reader's mind and serve as solemn warnings of pitfalls which wait to engulf the careless. They dispose the mind to humility and watchfulness and make it realise the need for divine guidance.

The modern cinema also projects on the screen much that is bad and immoral. Whatever may be the explanation offered by the protagonists of the cinema, evil is presented on the screen in an attractive fashion that grips people's minds and tempts them into the path of wickedness. Not so in the Puranas. Although they do point out that even great men now and again fell into error and committed wrong, the presentation is such as to warn the reader and not to allure him into evil ways. This is the striking difference between our epics and the modern talkies, which arises from the difference in the character of the people who produced them.

"You are the same unto us both. I must mean as much to you as the Pandavas. You must agree to come to my aid," said Duryodhana.

Salya answered: "Be it so."

Flattered by Duryodhana's splendid reception, Salya deserted the Pandavas who were entitled to his love and esteem and pledged his word to fight on Duryodhana's side which shows what dangers may lurk in receiving the hospitality of kings.

Feeling that it would not be right to go back without meeting Yudhishthira, Salya then turned to Duryodhana saying: "Duryodhana, believe me. I have given you my word of honour. I must however meet Yudhishthira and tell him what I have done."

"Go, see him and return soon. And do not forget your promise to me," said Duryodhana.

"Good luck to you. Go back to your palace. I will not betray you." Saying this, Salya went to the city of Upaplavya where Yudhishthira was camping.

The Pandavas received the ruler of Madra with great eclat. Nakula and Sahadeva were joyous beyond measure to see their uncle to whom the Pandavas narrated all their hardships and sufferings. When they started talking about obtaining his help in the war that was impending, Salya related to them the story of his promise to Duryodhana. Yudhishthira saw at once that it had been a mistake to have taken Salya's assistance for granted, thereby letting Duryodhana forestall them. Concealing his disappointment as best he could, Yudhishthira addressed Salya thus:

"Great warrior, you are bound to keep the promise you have made to Duryodhana. You are the equal of Vasudeva in battle and Karna will have you as his charioteer when he seeks Arjuna's life in the battle-field. Are you going to be the cause of Arjuna's death? Or are you going to save him then? I know I cannot fairly ask this of you. Still I do."

To which Salya rejoined:

"My lad, I have been tricked into giving Duryodhana my word and I shall be ranged against you in battle. But when Karna proceeds to attack Arjuna, if I happen to be his charioteer, you may take it he will go to battle disheartened and Arjuna shall be saved. Fear not. The sorrows and insults, which were visited on Draupadi and you all, will soon be an avenged memory. Henceforth, yours will be good luck. No one can prevent or alter what has been ordained by fate. I have acted wrongly. Bear with me."

CHAPTER LI

VRITRA

Indra, the Lord of the three regions, was once so drunk with pride that he quite forgot the courteous manners and forms that the gods had hitherto observed. When Brihaspati, preceptor of the gods, foremost in all branches of learning, and venerated alike by the gods and the asuras, came to his court, Indra did not rise from his seat to receive the acharya or ask him to be seated and failed to do the customary honours. In his great conceit, Indra persuaded himself to believe that the sastras allowed him as a king in court the prerogative of receiving guests seated. Brihaspati was hurt by Indra's discourtesy and, attributing it to the arrogance of prosperity, silently left the assembly. Without the high-priest of the gods, the court lost in splendour and dignity and became an unimpressive gathering.

Indra soon realized the foolishness of his conduct and, sensing trouble for himself from the acharya's displeasure, he thought to make up with him by falling at his feet and asking for forgiveness. But this he could not do, because Brihaspati had, in his anger, made himself invisible. This preyed on Indra's mind. With Brihaspati gone, Indra's strength began to decline, while that of the asuras increased, which encourag-

CC-0. In Public Domain. Agamnigam Digital Preservation Foundation,Chandigarh

ed the latter to attack the gods. Then Brahma, taking pity on the beleaguered gods, advised them to take unto themselves a new acharya.

Said he to them: "You have, through Indra's folly, lost Brihaspati. Go now to Twashta's son Visvarupa and request that noble spirit to be your preceptor and all will be well with you."

Heartened by these words, the gods sought the youthful anchorite Visvarupa and made their request to him saying: "Though young in years, you are well versed in the Vedas. Do us the honour of being our teacher."

Visvarupa agreed, to the great advantage of the gods for, as a result of his guidance and teaching, they were saved from the harrying asuras.

Visvarupa's mother was of the asura clan of daityas, which caused Indra to regard Visvarupa with suspicion. He feared that because of his birth, Visvarupa might not be quite loyal and his suspicion gradually deepened. Apprehending danger to himself from this descendent of the enemies of the gods, Indra sought to entice him into error with the temptresses of his court and so weaken him spiritually, but Visvarupa did not succumb. The artful and seductive blandishments of Indra's glamour girls had no effect on the young ascetic. He held fast to his vow of celibacy. When Indra found that his plan of seduction failed, he gave way to murderous thoughts and one day killed Visvarupa with the Vajrayudha.

The story goes that the world suffers vicariously for this great sin of Indra and, as a result of it, parts of the earth turned alkaline and became unsuitable for cultivation and women came to be afflicted with the physical troubles and uncleanness peculiar to them. The frothing of water is also attributed to this.

Twashta in his great rage and grief at Indra's cruel killing of his son and, desirous of avenging his death, performed a great sacrifice and out of the sacrificial flames sprang Indra's mortal enemy Vritra. Him Twashta sent against the chief of the gods, saying: "Enemy of Indra, may you be strong and may you kill Indra."

A great battle raged between the two in which Vritra was gaining the upper hand. When the battle was going against Indra, the rishis and the gods sought refuge in great Vishnu who offered them protection and said to them: "Be not afraid.

I shall enter Indra's Vajrayudha and he will win the battle in the end." And they returned in good heart.

They went to Vritra and said to him: "Please make friends with Indra. You are both equal in strength and valour."

Vritra respectfully answered: "O blameless ones, how can Indra and I become friends? Forgive me. There cannot be friendship between rivals for supremacy. Two great powers cannot co-exist as you know."

The rishis said in reply: "Do not entertain such doubts. Two good souls can be friends and their friendship is of enduring quality."

Vritra yielded saying: "Well, then, I shall cease fighting. But I have no faith in Indra. He might take me unawares. So I seek this boon of you, namely, that neither by day nor by night, neither with dry weapons nor with wet ones, neither with stone nor with wood, nor with metals, nor with arrows shall Indra be able to take my life."

"So be it," said the rishis and the gods.

Hostilities ceased. But soon Vritra's fears were confirmed. Indra only feigned friendship for Vritra but was, all the time, waiting for a suitable opportunity to slay him. One evening, he met Vritra on the beach and began to attack him in the twilight. The battle had raged for a long while when Vritra praising the Lord Vishnu, said to Indra: "Meanest of the mean, why do you not use the unfailing Vajrayudha? Hallowed by Hari, use it against me and I shall attain blessedness through Hari."

Indra maimed Vritra by chopping off his right arm but, nothing daunted, the latter hurled with his left hand, his iron mace at his assailant who thereupon cut down his other arm also. When Indra disappeared into the mouth of Vritra, great was the consternation of the gods.

But Indra was not dead. He ripped Vritra's belly open and issuing forth, went to the nearby beach, and directing his thunderbolt at the water hurled it so that the surf flew and hit Vritra. Vishnu having entered the foam, it became a deadly weapon and the mighty Vritra lay dead.

The long battle thus ended and the afflicted world heaved a sigh of relief. But to Indra himself, the end of the war brought only ignominy because his victory was secured through sin and deceit and he went into hiding for sheer shame.

Indra's disappearance caused the gods and the rishis great distress for, a people without a king or a council of state to govern them cannot prosper. So they went to the good and mighty king Nahusha and offered him the crown.

"Forgive me, I cannot be your king. Who am I to aspire to the seat of Indra? How can I protect you? It is impossible," he humbly objected. But they insisted, saying: "Do not hesitate. Be anointed our king. All the merit and potency of our penance will be yours and be an addition to your strength. The power and the energy of everyone you set your eyes on shall be transferred to you and you will be invincible." Thus over-powered, he agreed.

Revolution is no new thing. This story shows that, even in the world of the gods, there was a revolution leading to Indra's dethronement and Nahusha's installation as king in his stead. The story of Nahusha's fall is also instructive.

CHAPTER LII

NAHUSHA

THE sin of the unrighteous slaughter of Vritra pulled Indra down from his high estate and made him a fugitive. Nahusha became the king of the gods in his stead.

Nahusha started well, assisted by the merit and the fame earned by him while he was a king on earth. Thereafter, he fell on evil days. The assumption of the kingship of the gods filled him with arrogance. He lost his humility and became filled with lawless desires.

Nahusha indulged freely in the pleasures of heaven and gave himself up to untamed and lecherous thoughts. One day, he saw Indra's wife and became enamoured of her. Possessed by evil thoughts, he spoke in tones of command to the assembled gods:

"Why has not Sachidevi, the wife of the king of the gods, come to me? Am I not the king of the gods now? Send her to my house soon."

When she learnt this, Indra's wife was indignant. In fear and distress, she went to Brihaspati and cried out: "Preceptor, save me from this wicked person." Brihaspati offered her protection. "Fear not," he said, "Indra will soon be back. Stay here with me. You will regain your husband."

When Nahusha learnt that Sachidevi did not agree to fall in with his wishes and that she sought and obtained shelter under Brihaspati's roof, he became exceedingly angry.

The king's displeasure frightened the gods. They protested: "King of the gods, be not angry. Your anger will make the world sad. Sachidevi is another's wife, do not covet her. Do not swerve from the path of righteousness."

But, the infatuated Nahusha would not listen to them. Tauntingly, he said to them: "When Indra lusted for Ahalya, where were your principles of righteousness and good conduct? Why did you not prevent him then and why do you stop me now? What did you do when he so shamelessly murdered Visvarupa when the latter was in penance and where was your virtuous horror when he killed Vritra through deceit? Sachidevi's only course is to come and live with me and it will be for your good to get her reconciled to my proposal and leave her in my charge. So, now set about it," ordered Nahusha. The affrighted gods decided to talk the matter over with Brihaspati and somehow contrive to bring Sachidevi to Nahusha. They all went to Brihaspati and related to him what Nahusha had said and pleaded that Sachidevi should submit to Nahushas' desires.

At which, the chaste Sachidevi shook with shame and fear and cried out: "My God! I cannot do it. I sought refuge in you. Oh brahmana, do protect me."

Brihaspati consoled her and said: "He, who betrays one who has sought refuge, will meet with destruction. The very earth will not let the seed, that he sows, sprout. I will not give you up; Nahusha's end is approaching; be not afraid." He indicated a way of escape from her difficult situation by hinting that she should pray for time, and the shrewd Sachidevi took the hint and bravely went to Nahusha's palace.

As soon as Nahusha saw her, pride and lust having deprived him of his senses, he was beside himself with joy and said: "O fair one, do not tremble. I am the lord of the three regions; there can be no sin in your becoming my wife."

Hearing the wicked man's words, the virtuous Indrani, Indra's wife, trembled for a moment. Soon regaining composure she replied: "King of the gods, before I become yours, I have a request to make. Is Indra alive or is he dead? If he is alive, where is he? If, after making enquiries and searching for him, I do not find him, then no sin will attach to me and I could become your wife with a clear conscience."

Nahusha said: "What you say is right. Go and search for him and be sure to return. Remember the plighted word." Saying this, he sent her back to Brihaspati's house.

The gods went to the great Vishnu and complained to him of Nahusha. They said: "Lord, it was your might that killed Vritra but Indra bears the sin of it, and ashamed and afraid to show himself in his unclean state, he has hidden himself. Pray indicate a way of deliverance for him." Narayana said in reply: "Let him worship me; he will be cleansed of sin and the evil-minded Nahusha will meet with destruction."

Sachidevi prayed to the goddess of chastity, and, by her grace, reached where Indra was in hiding. Indra had reduced himself to the size of an atom and hid himself in a fibre of the stem of a lotus plant growing in Manasarovar. He was doing penance in that state waiting for better days. Sachidevi could not contain herself for sorrow at her husband's plight and burst into tears. She acquainted him with her troubles.

Indra spoke words of courage to her. "Nahusha's end is drawing near," he said. "Go to him by yourself and tell him that you consent to his proposal. Ask him to come to your residence in a palanquin carried by ascetics. Then Nahusha will be destroyed."

Sachidevi went and pretended to agree to Nahusha's proposal as Indra had asked her to do. Overjoyed that she had returned to him in this complaisant mood, the foolish Nahusha burst out: "Blessed one, I am your slave and ready to do your every bidding. You have been true to your word."

"Yes, I have come back. You will be my husband. I want you to do something which I very much desire. Are you not the lord of the world? It is my wish that you should come majestically to my house in a grander style than the great Vishnu or Rudra or the asuras. Let the palanquin be borne by the seven rishis. I shall then be glad and receive you and bid you welcome," she said.

Nahusha fell into the trap. "What a grand idea! Your imagination is wonderful. It pleases me exceedingly. It is but meet that the great rishis should carry me, who am blessed with the powers of absorbing the energy of those on whom my eyes fall. I shall do exactly as you have wished," said he, and sent her back home. The infatuated Nahusha called the rishis and bade them carry him on their shoulders. At this sacrilege, the three worlds were aghast and trembled. But worse was to come as the palanquin was carried along. Inflamed with thoughts of the beautiful Sachidevi waiting for him, Nahusha was impatient to reach her soon. So he began goading the rishi-bearers of his palanquin to go faster and he went so far in his mad wickedness as to kick Agastya, one of the bearers, saying "sarpa, sarpa." ('Sarpa' means 'to move' but 'sarpa' is also serpent.) The insanity of lust and arrogance had reached its culmination—Nahusha's cup of iniquity was full. "Meanest of the mean, do thou fall from heaven and become a sarpa on earth," cursed the rishi in his wrath.

Immediately Nahusha fell headlong, down from heaven, and became a python in the jungle and had to wait for several thousand years for his deliverance.

Indra was restored to his state. He became the king of the gods and Sachidevi's grief ended.

Relating this story of the sufferings of Indra and his wife to Yudhishthira and Draupadi at Upaplavya, their uncle Salya tried to comfort them. "Victory awaits the patient. Those, whom prosperity makes arrogant, meet with destruction. You, your brothers and Draupadi have gone through untold sufferings like Indra and his wife. Your trials will soon be over and you will regain your kingdom. The evil-minded Karna and Duryodhana will be destroyed even as Nahusha was," said Salya.

CHAPTER LIII

SANJAYA'S MISSION

THE Pandavas were camping at Upaplavya in Virata's territory. From there, they sent emissaries to all friendly rulers. Contingents arrived from all parts of the country and soon, the Pandavas had a mighty force of seven divisions. The Kauravas did likewise and collected an army of eleven divisions.

Then, as now, a division was made up of all arms grouped together in accordance with established military practice. In those days, a division consisted of 21,870 chariots, an equal number of elephants, thrice as many horses and five times as many foot soldiers, and they were provided with weapons of all kinds and other war equipment. Chariots were the "armoured cars" of ancient warfare and elephants, specially trained for war, corresponded to the "tanks" of modern times.

Drupada's brahmana messenger reached Dhritarashtra's court. After the usual ceremonial introduction and enquiries were over, the messenger addressed the assembled gathering on behalf of the Pandavas:

"Law is eternal and of inherent validity. You know this and I need not point it out to you. Dhritarashtra and Pandu are both Vichitravirya's sons and are, according to our usages, equally entitled to their father's property. In spite of this, Dhritarashtra's sons have taken possession of the whole kingdom, while Pandu's sons are without their share of the common inheritance. There can be no justification for this. Scions of the Kuru dynasty, the Pandavas desire peace. They are prepared to forget the sufferings they have undergone and to let bygones be bygones. They are unwilling to resort to war, because they fully know that war never brings any good but only destruction. Render unto them, therefore, the things that are due to them. This would be in accordance both with justice and with the agreement previously reached. Let there be no delay."

After this appeal of the messenger, the wise and brave Bhishma spoke. "By the grace of God," he said, "the Pandavas are safe and well. Although they have obtained the support of many princes and are strong enough for battle, they are not bent on war. They still seek peace. To restore to them their property is the only right thing to do."

Bhishma had not finished when Karna angrily broke in and, turning to the messenger, exclaimed:

"O brahmana, is there anything new in what you have said? What boots it to tell the same old story? How can Yudhishthira claim the property that he lost at the game board? If, now, Yudhishthira wants anything, he must beg for it as a gift! He arrogantly prefers this absurd claim in fond reliance on the strength of his allies—particularly Matsya and Panchala. Let me tell you clearly that nothing can be got out of Duryodhana by threats. As the plighted word, that the Pandavas should live undiscovered during the thirteenth year, has been broken, they must once again go back to the forest for another twelve years and return thereafter."

Bhishma interposed: "Son of Radha, you speak foolishly. If we do not do as this messenger tells us, war will be upon us in which we are certain to be defeated; and Duryodhana and all of us are doomed to destruction."

The disorder and excitement in the assembly made Dhritarashtra intervene. He said to the messenger: "Having in mind the good of the world and considering the Pandava's welfare, I have decided to send Sanjaya to them. Please return at once and tell Yudhishthira this." Then Dhritarashtra called Sanjaya aside and instructed him thus: "Sanjaya, go to the sons of Pandu and convey to them my affectionate regards and my kind enquiries about Krishna, Satyaki and Virata. Give all the princes assembled there my regards. Go there on my behalf and speak conciliatingly so as to secure the avoidance of war."

Sanjaya went to Yudhishthira on this mission of peace. After the introductory salutations, Sanjaya thus addressed Yudhishthira in the midst of his court:

"Dharmaputra, it is my good fortune to be able to see you again with my eyes. Surrounded by princes, you present the picture of Indra himself. The sight gladdens my heart. King Dhritarashtra sends you his best wishes and desires to know that you are well and happy. The son of Ambika* detests all talk of war. He desires your friendship and yearns for peace."

When Dharmaputra heard Sanjaya say this, he felt glad and answered:

"If so, Dhritarashtra's sons have been saved; nay, we have all escaped a great tragedy. I, too, desire only peace and hate war. If our kingdom is returned to us, we will wipe out all memories of the sufferings we have undergone."

Sanjaya spoke again: "Dhritarashtra's sons are perverse. Disregarding their father's advice and their grandsire's wise words, they are still as wicked as ever, but you should not lose patience. Yudhishthira, you stand ever for right conduct. Let us eschew the great evil of war. Can happiness be gained with possessions obtained through war? What good can we reap from a kingdom won after killing our own relatives? Do not therefore commence hostilities. Even if one were to gain the whole earth bounded by the ocean, old age and death are inescapable. Duryodhana and his brothers are fools, but that is no reason why you should swerve from rectitude or lose patience. Even if they do not give back your kingdom, you should not abandon the supreme path of dharma."

Yudhishthira answered:

"Sanjaya, what you say is true. Rectitude is the best of possessions, but are we committing wrong? Krishna knows the intricacies of rectitude and dharma. He wishes both sides well. I shall do as Vasudeva orders."

---

*Dhritarashtra.

Krishna said: "I desire the welfare of the Pandavas. I desire also that Dhritarashtra and his sons should be happy. This is a difficult matter. I think I can settle this issue by myself going to Hastinapura. If I could obtain peace from the Kauravas on terms which do not conflict with the welfare of the Pandavas, nothing would make me happier. If I succeed in doing so, the Kauravas will have been rescued from the jaws of death. I shall also have achieved something good and worthwhile. Even if, through a peaceful settlement, the Pandavas get back what is due to them, they will still serve Dhritarashtra loyally. They desire nothing else, but they are also prepared for war if need be. Of these two alternatives, peace and war, Dhritarashtra can choose what he pleases."

And Yudhishthira said to Sanjaya: "Sanjaya, go back to the Kaurava court and tell the son of Ambika this from me: 'Was it not through your generosity that we obtained a share of the kingdom when we were young? You, who made me a king once, should not deny us our share now and drive us to make a beggar's living on the charity of others. Dear uncle, there is enough room in the world for both of us and the Kauravas. Let there be no antagonism, therefore, between us.' Thus should you request Dhritarashtra on my behalf. Give the grandsire my love and regards and ask him to devise some way of ensuring that his grandchildren live happily in amity. Convey the same message to Vidura also. Vidura is the person who can best see what is good for all of us and advise accordingly. Explain matters to Duryodhana and tell him on my behalf: 'My dear brother, you made us, who were princes of the realm, live in the forest, clad in skins; you insulted and harassed our weeping wife in the assembly of princes. We bore all this patiently. Give us back, at least now, what is lawfully ours. Do not covet what belongs to others. We are five. For the five of us give at least five villages and make peace with us. We shall be content.' Say thus to Duryodhana, Sanjaya. I am prepared and ready for peace as well as for war."

After Yudhishthira had said these words, Sanjaya took leave of Kesava and the Pandavas, and went back to Hastinapura.

CHAPTER LIV

NOT A NEEDLE-POINT OF TERRITORY

AFTER he had despatched Sanjaya to the Pandavas, Dhritarashtra, filled with anxiety, could not get a wink of sleep that night. He sent for Vidura and spent the whole night talking to him.

"To give the Pandavas their share of the kingdom is the safest plan," said Vidura. "Only this can bring good to both sides. Treat the Pandavas and your own sons with equal affection. In this case, the right course is also the wise one."

Vidura counselled Dhritarashtra in this manner at great length.

The next morning Sanjaya returned to Hastinapura and gave a full account of what had taken place in Yudhishthira's court.

"Chiefly, Duryodhana should know what Arjuna said: 'Krishna and I are going to destroy Duryodhana and his followers, root and branch. Make no mistake about it. The Gandiva is impatient for war. My bow-string is throbbing even without my stretching it, and from my quiver, arrows keep peeping out impatiently, demanding when? when? Sanjaya, evil stars make the foolish Duryodhana seek war with Krishna and myself. Not even Indra and the gods can defeat us.' Thus spoke Dhananjaya," said Sanjaya.

Bhishma counselled Dhritarashtra against opposing the combined might of Arjuna and Krishna. "Karna, who boasts repeatedly that he will slay the Pandavas", said Bhishma, "is not equal to a sixteenth part of the Pandavas. Your sons are heading for destruction, listening to his words. When Arjuna beat back your son's attack on Virata's capital and humbled his pride, what was Karna able to do? When the gandharvas took your son prisoner, where did the invincible Karna hide himself? Was it not Arjuna who drove back the gandharvas?" Thus did Bhisma taunt Karna and warn the Kauravas.

"What the *pater familias* says is the only proper thing to do," said Dhritarashtra. "All wise men say, and I know, that it is best to seek peace. But what can I do? These fools would go their own way, however loudly I protest."

Duryodhana, who had been listening to all this, stood up. "Father, do not worry and tremble about our safety. We know how strong we are. That we shall win, is certain. Yudhishthira knows it too, for, giving up all hope of kingdom, he only begs now for five villages. Is it not clear from this that he is already scared about our eleven divisions? What can the Pandavas oppose to our eleven divisions? Why then do you doubt our victory?" Duryodhana said to his father and tried to cheer him up.

"My son, let us not have war," said Dhritarashtra. "Be satisfied with half the kingdom. It is enough if we govern that half well."

Duryodhana could stand it no longer. "The Pandavas will not receive even a needle-point of territory," he exclaimed, and left the court. In the excitement that prevailed, the court broke up.

Let us now relate what the Pandavas were saying among themselves. After Sanjaya left Upaplavya for Hastinapura, Yudhishthira said to Krishna: "Vasudeva, Sanjaya is Dhritarashtra's *alter ego*. From his speech, I have divined what is in Dhritarashtra's mind. Dhritarashtra is trying to secure peace without giving us any territory. In my simplicity, I was glad at first when I heard Sanjaya speak, but it soon became clear that my joy was unfounded. He then struck a middle line and spoke desiring peace, but the words with which he ended his message seemed to commend meekness to us, even if our just rights were denied. Dhritarashtra has not been playing fair with us. The crisis is approaching. There is none but you to protect us. I made my offer that we would be content with only five villages. The wicked Kauravas will refuse even this. How can we tolerate this height of intransigence? Only you can advise us in this crisis. There is none but you who knows what our duty is now and can guide us in dharma as well as in statesmanship."

Krishna said in reply: "For the good of you both, I have decided to go to Hastinapura. I shall go to Dhritarashtra's court and try to secure your rights without war. If my mission succeeds, it will be for the good of the world."

Yudhishthira said: "Krishna, pray do not go. What is the good of your going to the enemies' place now? The perverse Duryodhana will stick to his folly. I do not like your going among those unscrupulous men. We cannot let you jeopardise your safety, for the Kauravas will stop at nothing."

Krishna answered: "Dharmaputra, I know how wicked

Duryodhana is, but still we should make all attempts at a peaceful solution so as to give the world no cause to accuse us of not having done everything possible to avert war. We must omit nothing, no matter how slender our hopes of success. Have no fears for my safety, for, if the Kauravas offer me, a messenger of peace, any threat of bodily harm, I will reduce them to ashes!"

Said Yudhishthira: "You are all-knowing. You know our hearts as well as theirs. In expounding matters and in the art of persuasion, there is none better than you."

Krishna said: "Yes, I know you both. Your mind ever clings to righteousness and theirs is always steeped in hatred, jealousy and enmity. I will do all I can to secure the result which I know is dear to you—a settlement reached without war even though it may have but little for you. The signs are ominous and portend war. Still duty demands that we should make the attempt for peace."

Thus saying, Krishna took leave of the Pandavas and set off in his chariot to Hastinapura.

CHAPTER LV

KRISHNA'S MISSION

SATYAKI accompanied Govinda* to Hastinapura. Before setting out on his journey, Krishna had a long discussion with the Pandavas. Even the mighty Bhima, rather surprisingly, plumped for peaceful settlement. "Let not the race be destroyed. Peace is very much to be preferred," said he. The poet Vyasa makes Bhima speak thus in order to show that truly great warriors desire peace, and that to seek peace is not a sign of fear.

But Draupadi could not forget her humiliation. Holding her locks in her hand she stood before Krishna, and in a voice quivering with grief, she said: "Madhusudana, look at these tresses of mine and do what honour requires to be done. There can be no peace with honour. Even if Arjuna and Bhima are against war, my father, old though he is, will go to battle, supported by my children. Even my father can keep out. My children, with Subhadra's son Abhimanyu, at their head, will fight the Kauravas. I have, for the sake of Dhar-

---

*Krishna.

maputra, these thirteen years, suppressed the burning flame of anger within me. I can restrain myself no longer." And she sobbed, remembering the great outrage. Krishna was moved and said: "Weep not. Dhritarashtra's sons will not listen to my words of peace. They are going to fall and their bodies will be food for wild dogs and jackals. You will live to see us victorious and the insult to you will be fully avenged, and that too, soon." Draupadi was satisfied.

Madhava* halted for the night near the city of Kucasthala. When news of Krishna's forthcoming visit came, the city was in great excitement. Dhritarashtra issued orders for decorating the city and arrangements for receiving Janardana* were in full swing. Dhritarashtra issued instructions that Duhsasana's palace, being bigger and more beautiful than Duryodhana's, should be got ready and placed at the disposal of Krishna and his entourage and shamianas were erected at several places outside the city, along the route which Krishna's chariot was to take.

Dhritarashtra consulted Vidura. He said to him: "Make arrangements for presenting Govinda with chariots and elephants. Presents of other kinds should also be got ready." But Vidura said: "Govinda cannot be bought with presents. Give him that for which he is coming to the land of the Kurus. Does he not come here seeking a peaceful settlement? Make that possible. You cannot satisfy Madhava with other gifts."

When Govinda reached Hastinapura, the citizens had thronged in such numbers in the decorated streets that his chariot could only progress very slowly. He went first to Dhritarashtra's palace and then proceeded to Vidura's house. Kuntidevi met him there. Thinking of the sufferings of her sons and overpowered by grief, she wept. Krishna comforted her and, taking leave of her, made for Duryodhana's palace. Duryodhana gave Govinda welcome and invited him to dinner, but Krishna said with a smile: "Emissaries eat only after their mission is fulfilled. You may give a feast when my work here is completed." Declining Duryodhana's invitation, he returned to Vidura's house where he rested.

Vidura and Krishna took counsel together. Vidura told him that Duryodhana's arrogance was based on his confidence that no one could defeat him as long as Bhishma and Drona,

*Krishna.

who, he knew, were under a moral obligation not to abandon him, stood by him. Vidura said that it would be a mistake for Govinda even to enter the wicked man's court. All, who knew Duryodhana and his brothers, apprehended that they would plot, through fraud and deceit, against Krishna's life.

"What you say about Duryodhana is true. I have not come here with any hope that I would be able to secure a peaceful settlement, but only in order that the world might not hold me to blame. Have no fear for my life," said Krishna.

The next morning, Duryodhana and Sakuni came to Krishna and informed him that Dhritarashtra was waiting for him. Govinda went to the court along with Vidura.

As Vasudeva came into the court, that great assemblage of kings stood up. Saluting the elders with folded hands and with a word or a smile for the others, Krishna took his seat. The introductions over, Govinda rose from his seat and, turning to Dhritarashtra, explained the object of his visit. He made clear what the Pandavas wanted. "Dhritarashtra, do not bring ruin to your people. You regard as bad what is good for you and as good what is bad. It is your duty to restrain your sons. The Pandavas are prepared for war but they desire peace. They wish to live in happiness under you. Treat them also as your sons and devise an honourable solution, and the world will acclaim you," said Krishna.

Dhritarashtra said: "My friends know that I am not to blame. I desire precisely what Madhava has stated but I am powerless. My wicked sons do not listen to me. Krishna, I entreat you to advise Duryodhana."

Krishna turned to Duryodhana and said: "You are the descendant of a noble line. Pursue the path of dharma. Your present thoughts are unworthy and befit only men of low birth. On account of you, this famous line is in danger of being destroyed. If you listen to reason and justice, the Pandavas themselves will instal Dhritarashtra as king and you as the heir-apparent. Make peace with them by giving them half the kingdom."

Bhishma and Drona also pressed Duryodhana to listen to Govinda. But Duryodhana's heart could not be softened.

"I pity Dhritarashtra and Gandhari whom Duryodhana is dooming to bereavement and desolation by his misdeeds," said Vidura.

Dhritarashtra once again said to his son: "If you do not listen to Govinda's advice, our race will perish."

Drona and Bhishma also tried repeatedly to persuade Duryodhana and turn him from error.

Duryodhana was furious with everyone for pressing him in this matter to agree to a peaceful solution. He rose, and said: "Madhusudana, you wrong me out of love for the Pandavas. The others here also blame me, but I do not think I am one whit to blame in this matter. The Pandavas, of their own volition, staked their kingdom at play and, being defeated, justly forfeited it. How am I responsible for it? Losing the game, they went to the forests as in honour bound. For what fault of mine do they now seek battle and wish to slay us? I will not yield to threats. When I was young, the elders did us grievous wrong by giving the Pandavas, I do not know why, a part of the kingdom to which they had not a shadow of a right. I acquiesced then But they lost it at play. I refuse to return it to them. I am utterly blameless. I will not give the Pandavas an inch of land, not even a needle-point of it!"

When Duryodhana said that he had not committed wrong, Govinda laughed and said: "The play was fraudulently arranged by you in conspiracy with Sakuni and you afterwards insulted Draupadi in an assembly of princes, and yet, you have the impudence to say that you have committed no wrong," and reminded him of the other iniquities he had perpetrated against the Pandavas.

Duhsasana, seeing that Bhishma and others were accepting Krishna's indictment of Duryodhana said: "Brother, it seems that these people have a plot to bind you with ropes and hand you over to the Pandavas. Let us get away from here," and Duryodhana, accompanied by his brothers, walked out of the court.

Govinda addressed the court again and said: "Sires, the Yadavas and Vrishnis live happily, now that Kamsa and Sisupala are dead. In order to save a whole people, it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice an individual. Does it not happen occasionally that a village is abandoned in order that the country may be saved? I am afraid you will have to sacrifice Duryodhana if you want to save your race. That is the only way."

Dhritarashtra said to Vidura: "Bring far-sighted Gandhari here. It is possible that Duryodhana might listen to her."

Gandhari was sent for and, when she came to the court, Duryodhana was sent for. Duryodhana, his eyes red with anger, returned and Gandhari tried by all the means in her power to bring him round to reason. Duryodhana said "No" and again walked out of the hall.

He and his friends had plotted to seize Krishna. News of this reached the court. Govinda, who had anticipated all this, laughed and disclosed his divinity.

The blind Dhritarashtra, by the grace of Krishna, temporarily regained his sight and was able to see Krishna in his Visvarupa presence in every form.

"Pundarikaksha,* having seen your Visvarupa, I do not wish to see anything else. I ask that I should be blind again," said Dhritarashtra, and he became blind again.

"All our efforts have failed. Duryodhana is obstinate," said Dhritarashtra to Govinda.

And Krishna rose and, with Satyaki and Vidura on either side of him, left the court.

He went straight to Kunti. He told her what had happened and she asked him to convey her blessings to her sons. "The time has come," said she, "for that for which a kshatriya woman brings forth sons. May you protect my sons!"

A kshatriya mother brings forth children to be sacrificed in war. Purushottama‡ got into his chariot and sped towards Upaplavya. War became a certainty.

CHAPTER LVI

ATTACHMENT AND DUTY

Any ray of hope there might have been of a peaceful settlement when Krishna went to Hastinapura was extinguished when he returned and narrated what happened. Kunti was overwhelmed with grief when she learnt that it was to be war to the death.

"How can I," reflected Kunti, "give my thoughts tongue and say to my sons, 'Bear the insults. Let us not ask for any territory and let us avoid war'? How can my sons accept what is contrary to kshatriya tradition?" "At the same time," thought she, "what can be gained by mutual killings in the war and what happiness attained after the destruction of the race? How shall I face his dilemma?" Thus was she tormented by the prospect of wholesale destruction on the one hand and the claims of kshatriya honour on the other.

---

*Krishna, lotus-eyed.

‡Krishna, Supreme Being.

"How can my sons defeat the mighty three combined, Bhishma, Drona and Karna? They are warriors who have never yet met defeat. When I think of them, my mind trembles. I do not worry about the others. These three are the only people in the Kaurava army capable of fighting the Pandavas with any hope of slaying them. Of these, Dronacharya might refrain from killing my children from either love or unwillingness to meet one's own disciples in battle. The grandsire will certainly not want to kill them. But Karna is the Pandavas' chief enemy. He is anxious to please Duryodhana by killing my sons. Karna is a great man-at-arms. As I think of him engaged in battle against my other sons, my heart is consumed with agony like a faggot in the fire. Now is the time for me to seek Karna out and tell him the truth about his birth, on knowing which, he is bound to abandon Duryodhana's cause."

Tormented by these anxious thoughts about her children. Kunti went to the banks of the Ganga where Karna usually offered his daily prayers.

Karna was there at his devotions. Facing east and with uplifted hands he was in deep meditations. Kunti quietly stood behind him and waited. Karna was in meditation and was unmindful of everything until he felt the hot rays of the sun on his back.

His prayers over, Karna looked back to find Kunti standing behind him and holding the hem of his upper garment over her head to shield it from the burning sun. That Pandu's queen and the mother of the Pandava princes should be there, waiting patiently for him to finish his prayers, filled him with great confusion and amazement.

"The son of Radha and the chariot-driver Adhiratha bows to you. I am at your service. What can I do for you, O queen?" asked Karna, according to the established forms of respectful address.

"Karna," said Kuntidevi, "you are not Radha's son, nor is the charioteer your father. Do not think that you are a man of the chariot-driver's caste. You are Surya's son born out of the womb of Pritha of royal blood, otherwise known as Kunti. May good fortune attend you"! She then narrated the story of his birth. "You who were born in full panoply with armour and golden ear-rings," said Kunti, "not knowing that the Pandavas are your brothers, have joined Duryodhana and have come to hate them. To live in dependence on Dhritarashtra's sons, does not befit you. Join Arjuna and be one of the kings of the realm. May you and Arjuna put down the wicked! The whole world will be at your feet. Your fame will reach far and wide, like that of the brothers Balarama and Krishna. Surrounded by your five brothers, your effulgence will be like that of Brahma among the gods. In perplexing situations, one must do what gives satisfaction to loving parents. This is the highest dharma according to our scriptures."

When his mother spoke thus to him at the end of his devotions to the sun, Karna felt a sign in his heart that the Sun god endorsed Kunti's request, but he checked himself and took it to mean that the Sun god was testing his loyalty and strength of mind. He should not be found wanting.

With an effort of the will, he controlled alike the temptations of self-interest and the promptings of natural affection. He said sadly but firmly: "What you have said, dear mother, is contrary to dharma. If I swerve from the path of duty, I shall have done myself much more hurt than any that an enemy might inflict on me in the battle-field. You deprived me of all that was my birthright as a kshatriya when you threw me, a helpless babe, into the river; and now, you talk to me of my duties as a kshatriya. You denied me the motherly love which blesses all life and now, thinking of your other children's good, you tell me this story. If I now join the Pandavas, will not the world proclaim that I have done so out of fear? I have eaten the salt of Dhritarashtra's sons, won their confidence as their champion and enjoyed all the consideration and kindness they showed me; and now you want me—when the battle is about to be joined—to be untrue to my salt and go over to the Pandavas. The sons of Dhritarashtra look on me as the ark which will enable them to cross the deluge of war. I have myself urged them into this war. How can I now desert them? Could there be blacker treachery and baser ingratitude? What in life, or beyond it, would be worth a price like that? Mother dear, I must discharge my debt—aye, with life, if necessary; otherwise, I shall be no better than a common thief purloining my food all these years. I shall surely use all my powers against your sons in this coming war. I cannot deceive you. Please forgive me."

"But yet," continued he, "I cannot have my mother plead completely in vain. Part with Arjuna to me. Either he or myself must die in this war. I will not kill your other sons, whatever they may do unto me. Mother of warrior sons, you will still have five sons. Either I or Arjuna will survive this war, and with the other four sons, you will still have five".

When Kunti heard her first-born speak thus firmly, adhering to the kshatriya code, her heart was full of tumultuous and contrary feelings and, without trusting herself to speak, she embraced him and departed in silence.

"Who can go against what has been ordained?" she thought. "He has, at least, offered not to harm four of my sons. That is enough. May God bless him", and she returned home.

CHAPTER LVII

THE PANDAVA GENERALISSIMO

GOVINDA reached Upaplavya and told the Pandavas what had happened in Hastinapura.

"I spoke urging what was right and what was also good for them. But, it was all in vain. There is now no way out except the fourth, that is, the last alternative of war. The foolish Duryodhana would not listen to the advice tendered to him by the elders in the assembly. We must now prepare for war without delay. Kurukshetra is waiting for the holocaust."

"There is no longer any hope of peace," said Yudhishthira, addressing his brothers, and issued orders for marshalling their forces in battle array.

They formed the army in seven divisions and appointed Drupada, Virata, Dhrishtadyumna, Sikhandin, Satyaki, Chekitana and Bhimasena at the head of each division; they then considered who should be appointed Generalissimo.

Addressing Sahadeva, Yudhishthira said:

"We should select one of these seven to be Supreme Commander. He should be one capable of successfully facing the great Bhishma, who can burn enemies to ashes. He should be one who knows how to dispose his forces as circumstances require from time to time. Who do you think is most fitted for this responsibility?"

In the olden days, it was the practice to ascertain the views of younger people first, before consulting elders. This instilled enthusiasm and self-confidence in the younger folk. If the elders were consulted first, it would not be possible for others to speak with freedom, and even honest differences of opinion might savour of disrespect.

"Let us take as our Supreme Commander the king of Virata who helped us when we lived in disguise and with whose support we now demand our share of the kingdom," replied Sahadeva.

"It seems to me best to make Drupada the Generalissimo, for, in point of age, wisdom, courage, birth and strength, he is supreme," said Nakula. "Drupada, the father of Draupadi, who learnt archery from Bharadwaja, who has for long been waiting for an encounter with Drona, who is much respected by all kings, and who is supporting us, as if we were his own sons, should lead our army against Drona and Bhishma."

Dharmaputra then asked Dhananjaya for his opinion.

"I think, Dhrishtadyumna should be our chief in the battlefield, the hero who has his senses under control and who has been born to bring about Drona's end. Dhrishtadyumna alone can withstand the arrows of Bhishma whose skill in archery made even the great Parasurama hold back. He is the only man fitted to be our commander. I can think of no one else," replied Arjuna.

Bhimasena said: "O king, what Arjuna says is true, but the rishis and elders have said that Sikhandin has come into the world to kill Bhishma. My inclination would be to give the command to Sikhandin whose radiant face is like that of Parasurama. I do not think any one else can defeat Bhishma."

Yudhishthira finally asked Kesava for his opinion.

"The warriors mentioned are, each one of them, worthy of selection," said Krishna. "Any one of them would fill the Kauravas with fear. All things considered, I would endorse Arjuna's choice. Anoint Dhrishtadyumna, therefore, as your Supreme Commander."

Accordingly, Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada's illustrious son, who led Draupadi at the swayamvara and gave her away to Arjuna, who for thirteen long years was brooding over the insult that his sister had to suffer in Duryodhana's court, and who was waiting for an opportunity to avenge the wrong, was anointed Supreme Commander of the Pandava army. The lion-roar of warriors, the blowing of conchs and shells and the trumpeting of elephants rent the air. With warlike cheers which made the welkin ring, the Pandava army entered Kurukshetra in martial array.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE KAURAVA GENERALISSIMO

BHISHMA stood in command of the Kaurava army. Duryodhana bowed reverently to him and said:

"May it please you to lead us and achieve victory and fame even as Kartikeya led the devas. We will follow you as calves follow the sire-bull."

"So be it," said the grandsire. "But you should understand this—on which my mind is without a doubt. The sons of Pandu are to me the same as you, sons of Dhritarashtra. In fulfilment of my promise to you, I shall lead the army and discharge my duty. Tens of thousands of warriors will daily fall by my arrows on the battle-field. But, kill the sons of Pandu, I cannot. This war has not had my approval. Short of killing the Pandavas, I shall discharge all my obligations in this war.

"One thing more: the son of Surya, whom you hold dear, is opposed to my leadership and dislikes my ideas. Should you be so minded, ask him to take over the leadership of the army and conduct the battle from the outset; I shall not object", concluded the grandsire.

Bhishma did not like Karna and his ways.

"I will keep out as long as Bhishma is alive and come in only after he is gone. Then, I will oppose Arjuna and kill him," was Karna's boastful line. In the old days, too, even among big men there was jealousy and envy.

Duryodhana accepted the condition laid down by Bhishma and anointed him the Generalissimo of his forces, which rolled like a great flood into Kurukshetra.

CHAPTER LIX

BALARAMA

BALARAMA, the illustrious brother of Krishna, visited the Pandavas in their encampment. As Halayudha*, clad in blue silk, entered majestically like a lion, Yudhishthira, Krishna and others gave the broad-shouldered warrior a glad welcome. Bowing to Drupada and Virata, the visitor seated himself beside Dharmaputra.

"I have come to Kurukshetra," said he, "learning that the descendants of Bharata have let themselves be overwhelmed by greed, anger and hatred and that the peace talks have broken down and that war has been declared."

Overcome by emotion, he paused for a while and then continued: "Dharmaputra, dreadful destruction is ahead. The earth is going to be a bloody morass strewn with mangled bodies! It is an evil destiny that has maddened the kshatriya world to foregather here to meet its doom. Often have I told Krishna, 'Duryodhana is the same to us as the Pandavas; we may not take sides in their foolish quarrels.' He would not listen to me. His great affection for Dhananjaya has misled Krishna and he is with you in this war which I see he has approved. How can Krishna and I be in opposite camps? For Bhima and Duryodhana, both of them my pupils, I have equal regard and love. How then can I support one against the other? Nor can I bear to see the Kauravas destroyed. I will therefore have nothing to do with this war, this conflagration which will consume everything. This tragedy has made me lose all interest in the world and so I shall wander among holy places."

Having thus spoken against the calamitous war, Krishna's brother left the place, his heart laden with sorrow and his mind seeking consolation in God.

This episode of Balarama's, keeping out of the Mahabharata war is illustrative of the perplexing situations in which good and honest men often find themselves. Compelled to choose between two equally justifiable, but contrary, courses of action, the unhappy individual is caught on the horns of a dilemma.

It is only honest men that find themselves in this predicament. The dishonest of the earth have no such problems,

---

*Another name for Balarama from the plough he wielded as his weapon.

guided as they are solely by their own attachments and desires, that is, by self-interest. Not so the great men who have renounced all desire. Witness the great trials to which, in the Mahabharata, Bhishma, Vidura, Yudhishthira and Karna were put. We read in that epic how they solved their several difficulties. Their solutions did not conform to a single moral pattern but reflected their several individualities. The conduct of each was the reaction of his personality and character to the impact of circumstances. Modern critics and expositors sometimes forget this underlying basic factor and seek to weigh all in the same scales, which is quite wrong. We may profit by the way in which, in the Ramayana, Dasaratha, Kumbhakarna, Maricha, Bharata and Lakshmana reacted to the difficulties with which each of them was faced. Likewise, Balarama's neutrality in the Mahabharata war has a lesson. Only two princes kept out of that war. One was Balarama and the other was Rukma, the ruler of Bhojakata. The story of Rukma, whose younger sister Rukmini married Krishna, is told in the next chapter.

CHAPTER LX

RUKMINI

Bhishmaka, the king of Vidarbha, had five sons and an only daughter, Rukmini, a princess of matchless beauty, charm and strength of character. Having heard of Krishna and his renown, she wished to be united to him in wedlock and the desire daily grew in intensity. Her relatives approved the idea, all except her eldest brother Rukma, the heir-apparent, between whom and Krishna there was no love lost. Rukma pressed his father not to give Rukmini in marriage to the ruler of Dwaraka but to marry her instead to Sisupala, the king of Chedi. The king being old, Rukma's became the dominant voice and it looked as though Rukmini would be compelled to marry Sisupala.

Rukmini, whose heart was wholly Krishna's because she was Lakshmi-incarnate, was disconsolate. She feared that her father would be helpless against her domineering brother and would not be able to prevent the unhappy marriage. Mustering all her strength of mind, Rukmini resolved somehow to find a way out of her predicament. She took counsel with a brahmana whom, abandoning all maidenly reserve, she sent as her emissary to Krishna, charging him to explain matters to her beloved and sue for help.

The brahmana accordingly went to Dwaraka and conveyed to Krishna Rukmini's sad plight and her entreaty, and handed to him the letter Rukmini had sent through him. The letter ran as follows:

"My heart has already accepted you as lord and master. I charge you therefore to come and succour me before Sisupala carries me off by force. The matter cannot brook any delay; so you must be here tomorrow. Sisupala's forces, as well as Jarasandha's, will oppose you and will have to be overcome before you can have me. May you be the triumphant hero and capture me! My brother has decided to marry me to Sisupala and, as part of the wedding ceremonies, I am going to the temple along with my retinue to offer worship to Parvati. That would be the best time for you to come and rescue me. If you do not turn up, I will put an end to my life so that I may at least join you in my next birth."

Krishna read this and immediately mounted his chariot.

At the king's behest, Kundinapura, the capital of Vidarbha, was most gorgeously decorated and preparations for the wedding of the princess with Sisupala were in full swing. The bridegroom-elect and his associates, all sworn enemies of Krishna, had already assembled in the capital.

Balarama came to know of Krishna's sudden and secret departure, all by himself. Guessing that it must be about the daughter of the king of Vidarbha and anxious lest Krishna should be hemmed in alone by mortal enemies thirsting for his blood, he hurriedly assembled a great force and marched on to Kundinapura.

Leaving her apartments, Rukmini, accompanied by her retinue, went in procession to the temple, where divine service was held.

"Oh Devi," implored Rukmini, praying for her intercession. "I prostrate myself before thee who knowest my devotion. Grant that Krishna may espouse me."

Stepping out of the temple, Rukmini sighted Krishna's chariot and, straight as a needle to the attracting magnet, she fled to him and got into his chariot. And Krishna drove off with her, to the bewilderment of all around.

The servants ran to Rukma, the heir-apparent, and related what had happened.

"I will not return without killing Janardana," swore Rukma, and went in pursuit of Krishna with a large force. But, meanwhile, Balarama had arrived with his army, and a great battle ensued between the two opposing forces in which the enemy was utterly routed. Balarama and Krishna returned home in triumph, where Rukmini's wedding with Krishna was celebrated with customary rites.

The defeated Rukma was ashamed to return to Kundinapura and built at the very site of the battle between Krishna and himself a new city, Bhojakata, over which he ruled.

Hearing of the Kurukshetra battle, Rukma arrived there with a huge force. Thinking that he could thereby win the friendship of Vasudeva, he offered help to the Pandavas.

"Oh Pandavas," said he addressing Dhananjaya, "the enemy forces are very large. I have come to help you. Give me the word and I shall attack whichever sector of the enemy formation you would like me to. I have the strength to attack Drona, Kripa or even Bhishma; I shall bring you victory. Only let me know your wish."

Turning to Vasudeva, Dhananjaya laughed.

"Oh, ruler of Bhojakata," said Arjuna, "we are not afraid of the size of the enemy forces. We have no need of your help and do not particularly desire it. You may either go away or stay on, just as you like."

At this, Rukma was filled with anger and shame and went to Duryodhana's camp with his army.

"The Pandavas have refused my proffered assistance," said he to Duryodhana. "My forces are at your disposal."

"Is it not after the Pandavas rejected your assistance that you have come here?" exclaimed Duryodhana, and added: "I am not in such dire need yet as to welcome their leavings."

Rukma, thus put to disgrace by both sides, returned to his kingdom without taking part in battle.

Neutrality in war may be of several kinds. It may arise from conscientious objection to war or it may be due to mere conceit and self-interest. Yet others may keep aloof through cowardice or sheer inertia. Balarama was neutral in the Mahabharata war because of his love of peace. Rukma, on the other hand, abstained as a result of his conceit. Instead of acting according to dharma, he thought of personal glory, and neither side would have him.

CHAPTER LXI

NON-CO-OPERATION

It was the day before the commencement of the great battle. The grandsire, now the Kaurava Generalissimo, was with Duryodhana seeking to inspire him with his own heroic spirit and cheerfulness. Bhishma spoke of the strength, skill and prowess of the warriors ranged on the Kauravas' side. Duryodhana was cheered up. Presently, Karna became the subject of their talk.

"Karna has earned your affection," said Bhishma, "but I do not think much of him. I do not like his great hatred of the Pandavas, and he is too boastful. There is no limit to his arrogance and he is much given to disparaging others. I would not place him in the highest rank among the warriors of the land. Besides, he has given away the divine armour with which he was born. He is not therefore likely to be of great help to me in this battle. The curse of Parasurama is on him too: his command of supernatural weapons will fail him in his hour of need, for he will not be able to remember the mantras. And the battle that will ensue between him and Arjuna will prove fatal for Karna." Thus spoke Bhishma without mincing matters, and this was exceedingly unpalatable to Duryodhana and Karna. To make matters worse, Drona agreed with the grandsire and said:

"Karna is full of pride and overconfidence, which will cause him to be neglectful of the finer points of strategy, and through carelessness, he will suffer defeat."

Enraged by these harsh words, Karna turned to the grandsire with flaming eyes. "You sir," said he, "have always slighted me through mere dislike and envy and have never neglected an opportunity of humiliating me, though I gave you no reason. I bore all your taunts and thrusts for the sake of Duryodhana. You have said that I would not be of much help in the impending war. Let me tell you my settled conviction, it is *you*—not I—who will fail the Kauravas. Why hide your real feelings? The fact of the matter is that you have no genuine affection for Duryodhana, but he does not know it. Hating me, you seek to come between me and Duryodhana and poison his mind against me. And in furtherance of your wicked design, you have been belittling my strength and running me down. You have stooped to behaviour unworthy of a kshatriya. Age alone does not confer a title to honour and respect among warriors, but prowess does. Desist from poisoning our relations."

Turning then to Duryodhana, Karna said:

"Illustrious warrior, think well and look to your own good. Do not place too great a reliance on the grandsire. He is trying to sow dissension in our ranks. His appraisement of me will injure your cause. By running me down, he seeks to damp my enthusiasm. He has become senile and his time is up. His arrogance does not let him have regard for any one else. Age must be respected and experience is useful but, as the sastras warn us, there is a point when age becomes senility and ripeness falls into rottenness and decay. You have made Bhishma your Generalissimo who will, I have no doubt, earn some fame from the heroic deeds of others, but I will not bear arms while he is in command. Only after he has fallen will I do so."

The arrogant man is never conscious of his own arrogance. When accused of it, he charges the accuser with that very fault. His judgment is warped and he considers it a crime on the part of any one to point out his defect. This is well illustrated in this episode.

Controlling his anger, Bhishma replied: "Son of Surya, we are in a crisis and that is why you have not ceased to live this moment. You have been the evil genius of the Kauravas."

Duryodhana was in distress.

"Son of Ganga, I need the help of you both," he said. "You will both do deeds of great heroism, I have no doubt. At break of dawn, the battle joins. Let there be no fighting among friends, with the foe in full force before us!"

But Karna was adamant in that he would not take up arms so long as Bhishma was in supreme command. Duryodhana eventually yielded to Karna and suffered him to carry out his threat. Karna kept out during the first ten days of the battle, though all his men participated in it. At the end of the tenth day, when the great Bhishma lay on the battle-field covered all over with arrows, Karna went to him and bowed reverently and asked for forgiveness and blessings, which he received. Thereafter, Karna co-operated and himself proposed Drona for the command of the Kaurava forces in succession to Bhishma.

When Drona also fell, Karna took over the command and led the Kaurava forces.

CHAPTER LXII

KRISHNA TEACHES

ALL was ready for the battle. The warriors on both sides gathered together and solemnly bound themselves to honour the traditional rules of war. The code of conduct in war and methods of warfare vary from time to time. It is only if what was in vogue at the time of the Mahabharata war is kept in mind that we can understand the epic. Otherwise, the story would be puzzling in places.

From what follows, the reader may have some idea of the rules of warfare followed in Kurukshetra battle. Each day, the battle was over at sunset, and the hostiles mixed freely like friends. Single combats might only be between equals and one could not use methods not in accordance with dharma. Thus those who left the field or retired would not be attacked. A horseman could attack only a horseman, not one on foot. Likewise, charioteers, elephant troops and infantrymen could engage themselves in battle only with their opposite numbers in the enemy ranks. Those who sought quarter or surrendered were safe from slaughter. Nor might one, for the moment disengaged, direct his weapons against another who was engaged in combat.

It was wrong to slay one who had been disarmed or whose attention was directed elsewhere or who was retreating or who had lost his armour. And no shafts were to be directed against non-combatant attendants or those engaged in blowing conchs or beating drums.

These were the rules which the Kauravas and the Pandavas solemnly declared they would follow.

The passage of time has witnessed many changes in men's ideas of right and wrong. Nothing is exempt from attack in modern warfare. Not only are munitions made the target of attack but dumb animals such as horses, camels, mules and medical stores, nay, non-combatants of all ages, are destroyed without compunction.

Sometimes the established conventions went overboard even in the Mahabharata war. We see clearly in the story that occasional transgressions took place for one reason or another but, on the whole, the accepted rules of honourable and humane war were observed by both sides in the Kurukshetra battle and the occasional violations were looked upon as wrong and shameful.

Addressing the princes under his command, Bhishma said: "Heroes, yours is a glorious opportunity. Before you, are the gates of heaven wide open. The joy of living with Indra and Brahma awaits you. Pursue the path of your ancestors and follow the kshatriya dharma. Fight with joy and attain fame and greatness. A Kshatriya does not wish to die of disease or old age in his bed but prefers to die on the battlefield," and the princes responded by ordering their trumpets to be sounded and shouted victory to the Kauravas.

On Bhishma's flag shone brightly the palm tree and five stars. On Aswatthama's the lion tail fluttered in the air. In Drona's golden-hued standard, the ascetic's bowl and the bow glistened, and the cobra of Duryodhana's famed banner danced proudly with outspread hood. On Kripa's flag was depicted a bull while Jayadratha's carried a wild boar. Likewise others, and the battlefield thus presented a pageant of flags.

Seeing the Kaurava forces ranged in battle array, Yudhishthira gave orders to Arjuna:

"The enemy force is very large. Our army being smaller, our tactics should be concentration rather than deployment which will only weaken us. Array our forces, therefore, in needle formation."

Now, when Arjuna saw men arrayed on both sides for mutual slaughter, he was deeply agitated and Krishna spoke to him in order to quell his agitation and remove his doubts. Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna at this juncture is the Bhagavad Gita which is enshrined in millions of hearts as the Word of God, and is acknowledged by all as one of the supreme treasures of human literature. Its gospel of devotion to duty, without attachment or desire of reward, has shown the way of life for all men, rich or poor, learned or ignorant, who have sought for light in the dark problems of life.

CHAPTER LXIII

YUDHISHTHIRA SEEKS BENEDICTION

EVERYTHING was ready for the battle to begin. At this tense moment, both armies saw with amazement Yudhishthira, the steadfast and brave son of Pandu, suddenly doff his armour and put away his weapons and, descending from his chariot, proceed on foot towards the commander of the Kaurava forces. "What is this that Yudhishthira is doing?" asked everyone and was puzzled by this sudden and silent proceeding on the part of the Pandava.

Dhananjaya too was perplexed and he jumped down from his chariot and ran to Yudhishthira. The other brothers and Krishna also joined. They feared that perhaps Yudhishthira, surrendering to his natural inclination, had suddenly decided to seek peace on any terms and was going forward to announce this.

"King, why are you proceeding to the enemy's lines in this strange manner? You have told us nothing. The enemy is ready for battle, their soldiers sheathed in armour and with uplifted weapons, but you have doffed your armour and thrown aside your weapons and are proceeding forward, unattended and on foot. Tell us what you are about." Thus said Arjuna to Dharmaputra. But Yudhishthira was immersed in deep thought and proceeded forward silently. Then Vasudeva, who knew the hearts of men, smiled and said: "He is going to the elders to ask for their benediction before commencing this terrible fight. He feels it is not right to start such a grave proceeding without formally taking such benediction and permission. He goes to the grandsire to take his blessing and that of Dronacharya. So he goes unarmed. It is right that he does this. He knows proprieties. It is only thus that we might fare well in this battle."

The men in Duryodhana's army, when they saw Yudhishthira advancing with hands clasped in humble attitude, thought: "Here is the Pandava coming to sue for peace, frightened at our strength. Truly this man brings disgrace to the race of kshatriyas. Why was this coward born among us?" Thus did they talk among themselves reviling Dharmaputra though delighted at the prospect of securing victory without a blow.

Yudhishthira went through the lines of soldiers armed cap-a-pie and proceeded straight to where Bhishma was and, bending low and touching his feet in salutation, said:

"Grandsire, permit us to begin the battle. We have dared to give battle to you, our unconquerable and incomparable grandsire; we seek benediction before beginning the fight."

"Child," replied the grandsire, "born in the race of Bharatas, you have acted worthily and according to our code of conduct. It gives me joy to see this. Fight and you will have victory. I am not a free agent. I am bound by my obligation to the king and must fight on the side of the Kauravas. But you will not be defeated."

After thus obtaining the permission and the blessings of the grandsire, Yudhishthira went to Drona and circumambulated and bowed, according to form, to the acharya, who also gave his blessings, saying:

"I am under inescapable obligations to the Kauravas, O son of Dharma. Our vested interests enslave us and become our masters. Thus have I become bound to the Kauravas. I shall fight on their side. But yours will be the victory."

Yudhishthira similarly approached and obtained the blessings of Kripacharya and uncle Salya and returned to the Pandava lines.

The battle began, commencing with single combats between the leading chiefs armed with equal weapons. Bhishma and Partha, Satyaki and Kritavarma, Abhimanyu and Brihatbala, Duryodhana and Bhima, Yudhishthira and Salya, and Dhrishtadyumna and Drona were thus engaged in great battles. Similarly, thousands of other warriors fought severally according to the rules of war of those days.

Besides these numerous single combats between renowned warriors, there was also indiscriminate fighting among common soldiers. The name of "sankula yuddha" was given to such free fighting and promiscuous carnage. The Kurukshetra battle witnessed many such "sankula" fights wherein countless men fought and died in the mad lust of battle, and on the field lay piles of slaughtered soldiers, charioteers, elephants and horses, and the ground became a bloody mire in which it was difficult for the chariots to move about. In modern battles there is no such thing as single combats. It is all "sankula."

The Kauravas fought under Bhishma's command for ten days. After him, Drona took the command. When Drona died, Karna succeeded to the command. Karna fell towards the close of the seventeenth day's battle, and Salya led the Kaurava army on the eighteenth and last day.

Towards the latter part of the battle, many savage and unchivalrous deeds were done. Chivalry and rules of war die hard, for there is an innate nobility in human nature, but difficult situations and temptations arise which men are too weak to resist, especially when they are fordone with fighting and warped with hatred and bloodshed. Even great men commit wrong and their lapses thereafter furnish bad examples to others, and dharma comes to be disregarded more and more easily and frequently. Thus does violence beget and nourish adharma and plunge the world in wickedness.

CHAPTER LXIV

THE FIRST DAY'S BATTLE

DUHSASANA was leading the Kaurava forces and Bhimasena did the same on the Pandava side. The noise of battle rolled and rent the air. The kettledrums, trumpets, horns and conchs made the welkin ring with their clamour. Horses neighed, charging elephants trumpeted and the warriors uttered their "lion-roars." Arrows flew in the air like burning meteors. Fathers and sons, uncles and nephews slew one another forgetful of old affection and ties of blood. It was a mad and terrible carnage.

In the forenoon of the first day's battle the Pandava army was badly shaken. Wherever Bhiṣhma's chariot went, it was like the dance of the destroyer. Abhimanyu could not bear this and he attacked the grandsire. When the oldest and the youngest warriors thus met in battle, the gods came to watch the combat. Abhimanyu's flag, displaying the golden karnikara tree brightly waved on his chariot. Kritavarma was hit by one of his arrows and Salya was hit five times. Bhishma himself was hit nine times by Abhimanyu's shafts. Durmukha's charioteer was struck by one of Abhimanyu's sword-edge arrows and his severed head rolled on the ground. Another broke Kripa's bow. Abhimanyu's feats brought down showers of flowers from the gods who looked on. Bhishma and the warriors supporting him exclaimed: "Indeed, a worthy son of Dhananjaya!"

Then the Kaurava warriors made a combined attack on the valiant youth but he stood against them all. He parried with his own all the shafts discharged by Bhishma. One of his well-aimed arrows brought the grandsire's palm tree flag down and, seeing this, Bhimasena was overjoyed and made a great lion-roar which further inspired the valiant nephew.

Great was the grandsire's joy, seeing the valour of the young hero. Unwillingly, he had to use his full strength against the boy. Virata, his son Uttara, Dhrishtadyumna, the son of Drupada and Bhima came to relieve the young hero and attacked the grandsire who then turned his attentions on them. Uttara, the son of Virata, rode an elephant and led a fierce charge on Salya. Salya's chariot horses were trampled to death and thereupon he hurled a javelin at Uttara. It went with unerring aim and pierced him in the chest. The goad he had in his hand dropped and he rolled down dead. But the elephant did not withdraw. It continued charging until Salya cut off its trunk and hit it in many places with his arrows, and then it uttered a loud cry and fell dead. Salya got into Kritavarma's car.

Virata's son Sveta saw Salya slay his younger brother. His anger rose, like fire fed by libations of butter, and he drove his chariot towards Salya. Seven chariot warriors at once came up in support of Salya and protected him from all sides. Arrows were showered on Sveta and the missiles sped across like lightning in clouds. Sveta defended himself marvellously. He parried their shafts with his own and cut their javelins down as they sped towards him. The warriors in both armies were amazed at the skill displayed by Sveta. Duryodhana lost no time now and sent forces to relieve Salya, whereupon there was a great battle. Thousands of soldiers perished, and numerous were the chariots broken and the horses and elephants killed. Sveta succeeded in putting Duryodhana's men to flight and he pushed forward and attacked Bhishma. Bhishma's flag was brought down by Sveta. Bhishma, in his turn, killed Sveta's horses and charioteer. Thereupon, they hurled javelins at one another and fought on. Sveta took a mace, and swinging it, sent it at Bhishma's car which was smashed to pieces. But the grandsire even before the mace dashed against the chariot, had anticipated it and jumped down, and, from the ground he pulled the string of his bow to his car and sent a fatal arrow at Sveta. Sveta was struck and fell dead. Duhsasana blew his horn and danced in joy. This was followed by a great attack on the Pandava army by Bhishma.

The Pandava forces suffered greatly on the first day of the battle. Dharmaputra was seized with apprehension, and Duryodhana's joy was unbounded. The brothers came to Krishna and were engaged in anxious consultations.

"Chief among Bharatas," said Krishna to Yudhishthira, "do not fear. God has blessed you with valiant brothers. Why should you entertain any doubts? There is Satyaki and there are Virata, Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna besides myself. What reason is there for you to be dejected? Do you forget that Sikhandin is awaiting for his predestined victim Bhishma?" Thus did Krishna comfort Yudhishthira.

CHAPTER LXV

THE SECOND DAY

THE Pandava army, having fared badly on the first day of the battle, Dhrishtadyumna, the Generalissimo, devised measures to avoid a repetition of it. On the second day, the army was most carefully arrayed and everything was done to instil confidence.

Duryodhana, filled with conceit on account of the success on the first day, stood in the centre of his army and addressed his warriors.

"Heroes in armour," he said in a loud voice, "our victory is assured. Fight and care not for life."

The Kaurava army, led by Bhishma, again made strong attack on the Pandava forces and broke their formation, killing large numbers.

Arjuna, turning to Krishna, his charioteer, said: "If we continue in this way, our army will soon be totally destroyed by the grandsire. Unless we slay Bhishma, I am afraid we cannot save our army."

"Dhananjaya, then get ready. There is the grandsire's chariot," replied Krishna, and drove straight towards him.

The chariot sped forward at a great pace. The grandsire sent his shafts welcoming the challenge. Duryodhana had ordered his men to protect the grandsire most vigilantly and never to let him expose himself to danger. Accordingly, all the warriors, supporting the grandsire, at once intervened and attacked Arjuna who, however, fought on unconcerned.

It was well known that there were but three on the Kaurava side who could stand against Arjuna with any chance of success —the grandsire Bhishma, Drona and Karna. Arjuna made short work of the warriors, who intervened in support of Bhishma. The way in which he wielded his great bow on this occasion, extorted the admiration of all the great generals in the army. His chariot flashed hither and thither sundering hostile ranks like forked lightning—so rapidly that the eye ached to follow its career.

Duryodhana's heart beat fast as he watched this combat. His confidence in the great Bhishma began to be shaken.

"Son of Ganga," Duryodhana said, "it seems as if even while you and Drona are alive and fighting, this irresistible combination of Arjuna and Krishna will destroy our entire army. Karna whose devotion and loyalty to me are most genuine stands aside and does not fight for me only because of you. I fear I shall be deceived and you will not take steps quickly to destroy Phalguna*."

The gods came down to watch the combat between Bhishma and Arjuna. These were two of the greatest warriors on earth. Both chariots were drawn by white steeds. From either side flew arrows in countless number. Shaft met shaft in the air and sometimes the grandsire's missile hit Arjuna's breast and that of Madhava† and the blood flowing made Madhava more beautiful than ever as he stood like a green palasa tree in full bloom with crimson flowers. Arjuna's wrath rose when he saw his dear charioteer hit and he pulled his bow and sent well-aimed arrows at the grandsire. The combatants were equal and the battle raged for a long while. In the movements the chariots made they were so close to one another and moved about so fast that it was not possible to say where Arjuna was and where Bhishma. Only the flag could be distinguished.

As this great and wonderful scene was enacted in one part of the field, at another place a fierce battle was being fought between Drona and his born enemy Dhrishtadyumna, the son of the king of the Panchalas and brother of Draupadi. Drona's attack was powerful and Dhrishtadyumna was wounded badly. But the latter retaliated with equal vigour and with a grin of hatred he shot arrows and sped other missiles at Drona. Drona defended himself with great skill. He parried the sharp missiles

*Arjuna †Krishna

and the heavy maces hurled at him with his arrows and broke them to pieces even as they sped in the air. Many times did Dhrishtadyumna's bow break, hit by Drona's arrows. One of Drona's arrows killed the Panchala prince's charioteer. Thereupon Dhrishtadyumna took up a mace and, jumping down from the chariot, went forward on foot. Drona sent an arrow which brought the mace down. Dhrishtadyumna then drew his sword and rushed forward like a lion springing on its elephant-prey. But Drona again disabled him and prevented his advance. Just then Bhima who saw the Panchala's predicament sent a shower of arrows on Drona and carried Dhrishtadyumna to safety in his chariot.

Duryodhana who saw this sent the Kalinga forces against Bhimasena. Bhima killed the Kalinga warriors in great number. Like Death itself he moved about among his enemies and felled them to the ground. So fierce was the destruction that the entire army trembled in fear.

When Bhishma saw this, he came to relieve the Kalingas. Satyaki, Abhimanyu and other warriors came up in support of Bhima. One of Satyaki's shafts brought Bhishma's charioteer down and the horses of Bhishma's chariot, left uncontrolled, bolted carrying Bhishma away from the field. The Pandava army was wild with enthusiasm when Bhishma's chariot sped thus out of the field. They took advantage of the situation and made a fierce attack on the Kaurava army. Great was the loss the Kaurava army suffered in that day's battle as a result of Arjuna's deeds of valour. The generals of the Kaurava army were greatly perturbed and their previous day's enthusiasm had all disappeared. They eagerly looked forward to sunset when there would be an end to the day's battle.

As the sun sank in the west, Bhishma said to Drona: "It is well we stop the fighting now. Our army is disheartened and weary."

On the side of the Pandavas, Dhananjaya and others returned in great cheer to their camp, with bands playing. At the end of the second day's battle, the Kauravas were in the mood that the Pandavas were in the previous evening.

CHAPTER LXVI

THE THIRD DAY'S BATTLE

On the morning of the third day Bhishma arrayed his army in eagle formation and himself led it while Duryodhana and his forces protected the rear. So great was the care taken over every detail that the Kauravas were certain that there could be no mishap for them that day.

The Pandavas too arrayed their forces with skill. Dhananjaya and Dhrishtadyumna decided in favour of a crescent formation of their army so as more effectually to cope with the eagle formation of the enemy's forces. On the right horn of the crescent stood Bhima and on the left Arjuna, leading the respective divisions.

The battle began. All arms were at once engaged and blood flowed in torrents and the dust that was raised by chariots, horses and elephants rose to hide the sun. Dhananjaya's attack was powerful but the enemy stood firm.

A counter-attack was made by the Kauravas concentrating on Arjuna's position. Javelins and spears and other missiles flew in the air shining like forked lightning in a thunderstorm. Like a great cloud of locusts the shafts covered Arjuna's chariot, but with amazing skill he raised a moving fortification around his chariot, with arrows discharged in an unending stream from his famous bow.

At another point Sakuni led a large force against Satyaki and Abhimanyu. Satyaki's chariot was broken to shivers and he had to scramble up Abhimanyu's chariot and thereafter both fought from the same chariot. They were able to destroy Sakuni's forces.

Drona and Bhishma jointly attacked Dharmaputra's division and Nakula and Sahadeva joined their brother in opposing Drona's offensive.

Bhima and his son Ghatotkacha attacked Duryodhana's division and in that day's battle the son appeared to excel his great father in valour. Bhima's shafts hit Duryodhana and he lay in swoon in his chariot. His charioteer quickly drove the chariot away from the scene, fearing that the forces would be completely demoralised if they saw that the prince had been disabled. But even this movement created great confusion. Bhimasena took full advantage of the position and worked havoc among the fleeing Kaurava forces. Drona and Bhishma who saw the discomfiture and confusion of the Kaurava army came up quickly and restored confidence. The scattered forces were brought together and Duryodhana was again seen leading them.

"How can you stand thus," said Duryodhana to the grandsire, "looking on when our forces are scattered and put to disgraceful flight? I fear you are too kind to the Pandavas. Why did you not tell me frankly 'I love the Pandavas; Dhrishtadyumna and Satyaki are my friends and I cannot attack or slay them?' You should have stated the position explicitly to me. Surely these men are not equal to you, and if you were so minded, you could deal with them easily. Even now, it would be best if you and Drona told me frankly your mind in the matter."

The chagrin of defeat, and the knowledge that the grandsire disapproved of his ways made Duryodhana speak thus bitterly, but Bhishma merely smiled and said: "Wasn't I quite frank in my advice to you? That advice you rejected when you decided on war. I tried to prevent the war but, now that it has come, I am fulfilling my duties by you with all my might. I am an old man and what I am doing is quite my utmost."

Saying thus, the grandsire resumed his operations. The turn of events in the forenoon had been so much in their favour that the delighted Pandavas were now somewhat careless. They did not expect Bhishma to rally his forces and attack them again. But, stung by Duryodhana's reproaches, the grandsire raged about the field like a destroying fire. He rallied his men and delivered the most severe attack yet made on the Pandava army. The latter thought that the grandsire had multiplied himself into a number of Bhishmas fighting at several points; so swift were his movements that afternoon. Those who opposed him were struck down and perished like moths in the fire. The Pandava army was thoroughly broken and began to scatter. Vasudeva, Partha and Sikhandin tried hard to restore order and confidence, but were unsuccessful. "Dhananjaya," said Krishna, "now has the critical time come. Be true to your decision not to flinch from your duty to kill in battle Bhishma, Drona and all the other friends and relatives and respected elders. You have pledged yourself to it and you have now to carry it out. Otherwise our army is lost beyond redemption. You must now attack the grandsire."

"Drive on," said Arjuna.

As Dhananjaya's chariot sped on towards Bhishma, it met a hot reception from the grandsire, who covered it with his arrows. But, Arjuna bent his bow and discharged three shafts which broke the grandsire's bow. Bhishma picked up another bow but it too met the same fate. The grandsire's heart was gladdened when he saw Arjuna's skill in archery.

"Hail, brave warrior!" applauded the grandsire, even as, taking up another bow, he poured shafts on Arjuna's chariot with unerring aim.

Krishna was not happy at the way Arjuna met the attack. The grandsire's bow was working fiercely, but Arjuna's hands did not do their best, for his heart was not in it. He had too much regard for his great grandsire.

Krishna thought that, if Arjuna went on like this, the army, which had been so badly demoralized already, would be utterly destroyed and all would be lost. Krishna managed the chariot skilfully, but in spite of it, both he and Arjuna were hit many times by Bhishma's arrows.

Janardana's* anger rose. "I can stand this no longer, Arjuna. I shall kill Bhishma myself if you will not do it!" he exclaimed, and dropping the reins, he took up his discus and jumped down from the chariot and dashed forward towards Bhishma.

Bhishma was far from being perturbed at this. On the contrary, his face expanded with ecstatic joy. "Come, come, Oh Lotus-eyed One!" he exclaimed. "I bow to you, Oh Madhava. Lord of the World, have you indeed come down from the chariot for my sake? I offer you my life. If I be slain by you, I shall be glorified in the three worlds. Give me that boon. May your hands take this life away and save me for eternity."

Arjuna was distressed to see this. He jumped down and ran after Krishna. Overtaking him with great difficulty, he entreated Krishna to turn back.

"Do not lose your patience with me. Desist and I promise not to flinch," he said, and persuaded Krishna to return. The chariot reins were again in Krishna's hands. Arjuna attacked the Kaurava forces furiously and thousands were slain by him. The Kauravas suffered a severe defeat on the evening of the third day. As they returned to their camps in torch light, they said to one another: "Who can equal Arjuna? There is nothing strange in his being victorious." So marvellous was Arjuna's prowess that day.

---

*Krishna.

CHAPTER LXVII

THE FOURTH DAY

THE battle was very much the same every day and the narrative is one of monotonous fighting and killing. Still, the great battle is the central event in the Mahabharata and, if we skip over it, we cannot fully understand the epic heroes of that crowded stage.

At break of day, Bhishma arrayed the Kaurava forces again. Surrounded by Drona, Duryodhana and others, the grandsire looked verily like great Indra, holding his thunderbolt, surrounded by the devas. The Kaurava army, with its chariots, elephants and horses all arrayed in battle order and ready for the fight, presented the appearance of the sky in a great thunderstorm.

The grandsire gave orders for advance. Arjuna watched the hostile movements from his chariot, whereon the Hanuman flag was waving, and he too got ready. The battle commenced. Aswatthama, Bhurisravas, Salya, Chitrasena and the son of Chala surrounded Abhimanyu and attacked him. The warrior fought like a lion opposing five elephants. Arjuna saw this combined attack on his son and, with a wrathful lion-roar joined his son whereat the tempo of fighting flared up. Dhrishtadyumna also arrived with a large force. The son of Chala was killed. Chala himself now joined and he, with Salya, made a strong attack on Dhrishtadyumna. The latter's bow was severed into two by a sharp missile discharged by Salya. Abhimanyu saw this and sent a shower of arrows on Salya and put him in such danger that Duryodhana and his brothers rushed to Salya's help. Bhimasena also appeared on the scene at this juncture. When Bhima raised his mace aloft, Duryodhana's brothers quailed. Duryodhana, who saw this, was exceedingly angry and immediately charged against Bhima with a large force of elephants. As soon as Bhima saw the elephants coming up, he descended from his chariot, iron mace in hand, attacked them so fiercely that they scattered in a wild stampede, throwing the Kaurava ranks into disorder. It will be seen that even in our Puranic stories elephants fared as badly in battle as they did in the wars of the Greeks and the Romans.

Bhima's attack on the elephants was like Indra's devastating onslaught on the winged mountains. The slaughtered mammoths lay dead on the field like great hills. Those that escaped, fled in panic and caused great havoc in the Kaurava army, trampling numerous soldiers in their wild career. Duryodhana, thereupon, ordered a wholesale attack on Bhima, but he stood firm as a rock and presently, the Pandava warriors came up and joined him. A number of Duryodhana's arrows struck Bhima's chest and he climbed up his chariot again.

"Visoka, now is the glad hour," said Bhima to his charioteer. "I see a number of Dhritarashtra's sons before me, ready to be shaken down like ripe fruits on a tree. Keep your hold well on the reins and drive on. I am going to despatch these wretches to Yama's abode."

Bhima's arrows would have killed Duryodhana then and there, had it not been for his armour. Eight of Duryodhana's brothers were slain in that day's battle by Bhima. Duryodhana fought fiercely. Bhima's bow was smashed by one of Duryodhana's arrows. Taking up a fresh bow, Bhima sent an arrow with a knife edge at Duryodhana which cut the latter's bow into two. Not baffled by this, Duryodhana took up a fresh bow and discharged a well-aimed shaft which struck Bhima on his chest with such force that he reeled and sat down. The Pandava warriors now poured a great shower of arrows on Duryodhana. Ghatotkacha, who saw his father sit dazed with the force of the blow, got exceedingly angry and fell on the Kaurava army, which was unable to stand against his onslaught.

"We cannot fight this rakshasa today," said Bhishma to Drona. "Our men are weary. It is nearing sunset and the might of the rakshasas grows with the darkness. Let us deal with Ghatotkacha tomorrow."

The grandsire ordered his army to retire for the night. Duryodhana sat musing in his tent, his eyes filled with tears. He had lost many of his brothers in that day's battle.

"Sanjaya," exclaimed Dhritarashtra, "every day, you give me nothing but bad news. Your tale has ever been one of sorrow—of defeat and loss of dear ones! I cannot stand this any more. What stratagem can save my people? How are we going to win in this fight? Indeed, I am full of fear. It seems fate is more powerful than human effort."

"King," said Sanjaya in reply, "is this not all the result of your own folly? Of what avail is grief? How can I manufacture good news for you? You should hear the truth with fortitude."

"Ah! Vidura's words are coming true," said the blind old king, plunged in great grief.

CHAPTER LXVIII

THE FIFTH DAY

"I AM like a shipwrecked man seeking to save himself by swimming in a storm-tossed ocean. I shall surely drown, overwhelmed in this sea of sorrow."

Again and again, when Sanjaya related the happenings of the great battle, Dhritarashtra would thus lament, unable to bear his grief.

"Bhima is going to kill all my sons," he said. "I do not believe there is anyone with prowess enough in our army to protect my sons from death. Did Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Aswatthama look on unconcerned when our army fled in terror? What indeed is their plan? When and how are they going to help Duryodhana? How are my sons to escape from destruction?"

Saying thus, the blind old king burst into tears.

"Calm yourself, King," said Sanjaya. "The Pandavas rest on the strength of a just cause. So, they win. Your sons are brave but their thoughts are wicked. Therefore, luck does not favour them. They have done great injustice to the Pandavas, and they are reaping the harvest of their sins. The Pandavas are not winning by charms or magic incantations. They are fighting according to the practice of kshatriyas. Their cause being just, they have strength. Friends advised you, but you discarded wise counsel. Vidura, Bhishma, Drona and I tried to stop you in your unwise course, but you did not listen and you went on. Like a foolish sick man who refuses to drink bitter medicine, you obstinately refused to follow our advice, which would have saved your people, preferring to do as your foolish son desired. You are in distress now. Last night, Duryodhana asked Bhishma the same question as you put to me now, and Bhishma gave the same answer as I give you."

When the fighting was stopped on the evening of the fourth day, Duryodhana went by himself to Bhishma's tent and, bowing reverently, said:

"Grandsire, the world knows that you are a warrior who knows not fear. The same is the case with Drona, Kripa, Aswatthama, Kritavarma, Sudakshin, Bhurisravas, Vikarna and Bhagadatta. Death has no terror for these veterans. There is no doubt, the prowess of these great warriors is limitless, even like your own. All the Pandavas combined cannot defeat any one of you. What then is the mystery behind this daily defeat of our army at the hands of the sons of Kunti?"

Bhishma replied: "Prince, listen to me. I have given you advice on every occasion and told you what was good for you. But, you have always refused to follow what your elders counselled you to do. Again, I tell you that it is best for you to make peace with Pandu's sons. For your good as well as for that of the world, that is the only course that should be followed. Belonging to the same royal house, you can all enjoy this vast country as yours. I gave you this advice, but you disregarded it and have grievously wronged the Pandavas, the fruit of which you are now reaping. The Pandavas are protected by Krishna himself. How then can you hope for victory? Even now, it is not loo late for making peace and that is the way to rule your kingdom, making the Pandavas, your powerful brothers, friends instead of enemies. Destruction awaits you if you insult Dhananjaya and Krishna, who are none other than Nara and Narayana."

Duryodhana took leave and went to his tent, but he could not sleep that night.

The battle was resumed the next morning. Bhishma arrayed the Kaurava forces in a strong formation; so did Dhrishtadyumna, the Pandava army. Bhima stood at the head of the advance lines as usual, and Sikhandin, Dhrishtadyumna and Satyaki stood behind, securely guarding the main body, aided by other generals. Dharmaputra and the twin brothers held the rear. Bhishma bent his bow and discharged his shafts. The Pandava army suffered greatly under the grandsire's attack. Dhananjaya saw this and retaliated by fierce shafts aimed at Bhishma. Duryodhana went to Drona and complained bitterly according to his wont. Drona upbraided him severely: "Obstinate prince, you talk without understanding. You are ignorant of the Pandavas' strength. We are doing our best." Drona's powerful attack on the Pandava army was too much for Satyaki who was meeting it and Bhima, therefore turned his attentions to Drona. The battle grew fiercer still. Drona, Bhishma and Salya made a combined attack on Bhima. Sikhandin supported Bhima by pouring a shower of arrows on Bhishma. As soon as Sikhandin stepped in, Bhishma turned away, for Sikhandin was born a girl, and Bhishma's principles did not permit him to attack a woman. In the end, this same objection proved to be the cause of Bhishma's death. When Drona saw Bhishma turn away, he attacked Sikhandin fiercely and compelled him to withdraw.

There was a promiscuous battle the whole of the forenoon of the fifth day, and the slaughter was terrific. In the afternoon, Duryodhana sent a large force to oppose Satyaki. But Satyaki destroyed it completely and advanced to attack Bhurisravas. Bhurisravas, who was a powerful opponent, put Satyaki's men to fight, and pressed Satyaki himself so fiercely that he was in distress. Satyaki's ten sons saw their father's plight and sought to relieve him by launching an offensive against Bhurisravas, but Bhurisravas undaunted by numbers, opposed the combined attack and was not to be shaken. His well-aimed darts broke their weapons and they were all slain, strewn on the field like so many tall trees struck down by lightning. Satyaki, wild with rage and grief, drove forward at a furious pace to slay Bhurisravas. The chariots of the two warriors dashed against each other and crumbled to pieces, and the warriors stood face to face with sword and shield in desperate single combat. Then, Bhima came and took away Satyaki by force into his chariot and drove away, for Bhima knew that Bhurisravas was an unrivalled swordsman and he did not want Satyaki to be slain.

Arjuna killed thousands of warriors that evening. The soldiers, despatched against him by Duryodhana, perished like moths in the fire. As the sun went down and Bhishma gave orders to cease fighting, the princes on the Pandava army surrounded Arjuna and greeted him with loud cries of admiration and victory. The armies on both sides retired to camp, along with the tired horses and elephants.

CHAPTER LXIX

THE SIXTH DAY

According to Yudhishthira's order Dhrishtadyumna arrayed the Pandava army in makara* formation for the sixth day's battle. The Kaurava army was arrayed in krauncha† formation. We know, how, similarly, names are given to physical exercise, asanas, or postures. Vyuha was the general name for battle array. Which vyuha was best for any particular occasion, depended on the requirements of the offensive and defensive plans of the day. What the strength and composition of the forces arrayed should be and what positions they should take up were decided upon, according to the situation as it developed from time to time.

The sixth day was marked by a prodigious slaughter, even in the first part of the morning. Drona's charioteer was killed and Drona took the reins of the horses himself and used his bow as well. Great was the destruction he effected. He went about like fire among cotton heaps. The formations of both armies were soon broken and indiscriminate and fierce fighting went on. Blood flowed in torrents and the field was covered by dead bodies of soldiers, elephants and horses and the debris of chariots.

Bhimasena pierced the enemy's lines to seek out Duryodhana's brothers and finish them. They, for their part, did not wait to be sought, but rushed on him, in a combined attack from all sides. He was attacked by Duhsasana, Durvishaha, Durmata, Jaya, Jayatsena, Vikarna, Chitrasena, Sudarsana, Charuchitra, Suvarma, Dushkarna and others, all together. Bhimasena, who did not know what fear was, stood up and fought them all. They desired to take him prisoner and he to kill them all on the spot. The battle raged fiercely, even like the ancient battle between the gods and the asuras. Suddenly, the son of Pandu lost his patience and jumped down from his chariot, mace in hand, and made straight on foot for the sons of Dhritarashtra, in hot haste to slay them.

When Dhrishtadyumna saw Bhima's chariot disappear in the enemy lines, he was alarmed and rushed to prevent disaster. He reached Bhima's car, but found it was occupied only by the charioteer and Bhima was not in it. With tears in his eyes, he asked the charioteer: "Visoka, where is Bhima dearer to me than life?" Dhrishtadyumna naturally thought Bhima had fallen.

---

*A fabulous fish with horned head. †A heron.

Visoka bowed and said to the son of Drupada: "The son of Pandu asked me to stay here and, without waiting for my reply rushed forward on foot, mace in hand, into the enemy ranks." Fearing that Bhima would be overpowered and killed, Dhrishtadyumna drove his chariot into the enemy lines in search of Bhimasena, whose path was marked by the bodies of slain elephants. When Dhrishtadyumna found Bhima, he saw him surrounded on all sides by enemies fighting from their chariots. Bhima stood against them all, mace in hand, wounded all over and breathing fire. Dhrishtadyumna embraced him and took him into his chariot and proceeded to pick out the shafts that had stuck in his body.

Duryodhana now ordered his warriors to attack Bhimasena and Dhrishtadyumna and, not to wait for them to attack or challenge. Accordingly, they made a combined attack even though they were not inclined to engage themselves in further fighting. Dhrishtadyumna had a secret weapon, which he had obtained from Dronacharya and, discharging it, threw the enemy forces into a stupor. But Duryodhana then joined the fray and discharged weapons to counter the stupor-weapons of Dhrishtadyumna. Just then, reinforcements sent by Yudhishthira arrived. A force of twelve chariots with their equipage led by Abhimanyu came upon the scene to support Bhima. Dhrishtadyumna was greatly relieved when he saw this. Bhimasena had also by now refreshed himself and was ready to renew the fight. He got into Kekaya's chariot and took up his position along with the rest.

Drona, however, was terrible that day. He killed Dhrishtadyumna's charioteer and horses and smashed his chariot and Drupada's son had to seek a place in Abhimanyu's car. The Pandava forces began to waver and Drona was cheered by the Kaurava army.

Indiscriminate mass fighting and slaughter went on that day. At one time, Bhima and Duryodhana met face to face. The usual exchange of hot words took place and was followed by a great battle of archery. Duryodhana was hit and fell unconscious. Kripa extricated him with great skill and took him away in his own chariot. Bhishma personally arrived at the spot now and led the attack and scattered the Pandava forces. The sun was sinking, but the battle was continued for an hour yet and the fighting was fierce and many thousands perished.

Then the day's battle ceased. Yudhishthira was glad that Dhrishtadyumna and Bhima returned to camp alive.

CHAPTER LXX

THE SEVENTH DAY

Duryodhana, wounded all over and suffering greatly, went to Bhishma and said:

"The battle had been going against us every day. Our formations are broken and our warriors are being slain in large numbers. You are looking on doing nothing."

The grandsire soothed Duryodhana with comforting words: "Why do you let yourself be disheartened? Here are all of us—Drona, Salya, Kritavarma, Aswatthama, Vikarna, Bhagadatta, Sakuni, the two brothers of Avanti, the Trigarta chief, the king of Magadha, and Kripacharya. When these great warriors are here, ready to give up their lives for you, why should you feel downhearted? Get rid of this mood of dejection."

Saying this, he issued orders for the day.

"See there," the grandsire said to Duryodhana. "These thousands of cars, horses and horsemen, great war elephants, and those armed foot soldiers from various kingdoms are all ready to fight for you. With this fine army, you can vanquish even the gods. Fear not."

Thus cheering up the dejected Duryodhana, he gave him a healing balm for his wounds. Duryodhana rubbed it over his numerous wounds and felt relieved. He went to the field, heartened by the grandsire's words of confidence. The army was that day arrayed in circular formation. With each war-elephant were seven chariots fully equipped. Each chariot was supported by seven horsemen. To each horseman were attached ten shield bearers. Everyone wore armour.

Duryodhana stood resplendent like Indra at the centre of this great and well-equipped army.

Yudhishthira arrayed the Pandava army in vajravyuha. This day's battle was fiercely fought simultaneously at many sectors. Bhishma personally opposed Arjuna's attacks. Drona and Virata were engaged with each other at another point. Sikhandin and Aswatthama fought a big battle at another sector. Duryodhana and Dhrishtadyumna fought with each other at yet another point. Nakula and Sahadeva attacked their uncle Salya. The Avanti kings opposed Yudhamanyu, while Bhimasena opposed Kritavarma, Chitrasena, Vikarna and Durmarsha. There were great battles between Ghatotkacha and Bhagadatta, between Alambasa and Satyaki, between Bhurisravas and Dhrishtaketu, between Yudhishthira and Srutayu and between Chekitana and Kripa.

In the battle between Drona and Virata, the latter was worsted and he had to climb into the chariot of his son Sanga, having lost his own chariot, horses and charioteer. Virata's sons Uttara and Sveta had fallen in the first day's battle. On this seventh day, Sanga also was slain just as his father came up to his side. Sikhandin, Drupada's son, was defeated by Aswatthama. His chariot was smashed and he jumped down and stood sword and shield in hand. Aswatthama aimed his shaft at his sword and broke it. Sikhandin then whirled the broken sword and hurled it at Aswatthama with tremendous force, but it was met by Aswatthama's arrow. Sikhandin, badly beaten, got into Satyaki's chariot and retired. In the fight between Satyaki and Alambasa, the former had the worst of it at first but later recovered ground and Alambasa had to flee.

In the battle between Dhrishtadyumna and Duryodhana, the horses of the latter were killed and he had to alight from his chariot. He, however, continued the fight, sword in hand. Sakuni came then and took the prince away in his chariot. Kritavarma made a strong attack on Bhima but was worsted. He lost his chariot and horses and acknowledging defeat, fled towards Sakuni's car, with Bhima's arrows sticking all over him, making him look like a porcupine speeding away in the forest.

Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti were defeated by Yudhamanyu, and their armies were completely destroyed; Bhagadatta attacked Ghatotkacha and put to flight all his supporters. But, alone, Ghatotkacha stood and fought bravely, but in the end, he too had to save himself by flight, which gladdened the whole Kaurava army.

Salya attacked his nephews. Nakula's horses were killed and he had to join his brother in the latter's chariot. Both continued the fight from the same car. Salya was hit by Sahadeva's arrow and swooned. The charioteer skilfully drove the car away and saved Salya.

When the Madra king* was seen retreating from the field Duryodhana's army lost heart and the twin sons of Madri blew their conchs in triumph and, taking advantage of the situation, inflicted heavy damage on Salya's forces.

At noon, Yudhishthira led an attack on Srutayu. The latter's well-aimed arrows intercepted Dharmaputra's missiles, and his armour was pierced and he was severely wounded. Yudhishthira then lost his temper and sent a powerful arrow which pierced Srutayu's breast-plate. That day, Yudhishthira was not his normal self and burnt with anger. Srutayu's charioteer and horses were killed and the chariot was smashed and he had to flee on foot from the field. This completed the demoralisation of Duryodhana's army.

In the attack on Kripa, Chekitana, losing his chariot and charioteer, alighted and attacked Kripa's charioteer and horses with mace in hand and killed them. Kripa also alighted, and standing on the ground, discharged his arrows. Chekitana was badly hit. He then whirled his mace and hurled it at Kripacharya, but the latter was able to intercept it with his own arrow. Thereupon, they closed with each other, sword in hand. Both were wounded and fell on the ground, when Bhima came and took Chekitana away in his chariot. Sakuni similarly took wounded Kripa away in his car.

Ninety-six arrows of Dhrishtaketu struck Bhurisravas, and the great warrior was like a sun radiating glory, as the arrows, all sticking in his breast-plate, shone bright around his radiant face. Even in that condition, he compelled Dhrishtaketu to admit defeat and retire.

Three of Duryodhana's brothers attacked Abhimanyu who inflicted a heavy defeat on them but spared their lives, because Bhima had sworn to kill them. Thereupon, Bhishma attacked Abhimanyu.

Arjuna saw this and said to his illustrious charioteer: "Krishna, drive the car towards Bhishma."

At that moment, the other Pandavas also joined Arjuna, but the grandsire was able to hold his own against all five until the sunset and the battle was suspended for the day, and the warriors of both sides, weary and wounded, retired to their tents for rest and for having their injuries attended to. After this, for an hour, soft music was played, soothing the warriors to their rest. That hour was spent, says the poet, without a word about war or hatred and was an hour of heavenly bliss, and it was a glad sight to see. One can see herein what the great lesson of the Mahabharata is.

---

*Salya.

CHAPTER LXXI

THE EIGHTH DAY

WHEN the eighth day dawned, Bhishma arrayed his army in tortoise formation. Yudhishthira said to Dhrishtadyumna:

"See there, the enemy is in *kurma vyuha* You have to answer at once with a formation that can break it."

Dhrishtadyumna immediately proceeded to his task. The Pandava forces were arrayed in a three-pronged formation. Bhima was at the head of one prong, Satyaki of another, and Yudhishthira at the crest of the middle division. Our ancestors had developed the science of war well. It was not reduced to writing but was preserved by tradition in the families of kshatriyas. Armour and tactics were employed suitably to meet the weapons of offence and the tactics which the enemy used in those days.

The Kurukshetra battle was fought some thousands of years ago. Reading the story of the battle in the Mahabharata, we should not, having the practice and incidents of modern warfare in mind, reject the Mahabharata narrative as mere myth with no relation to fact. Only about a century and a half ago, the English admiral Nelson fought great sea battles and won undying renown. The weapons used and the vessels that actually took part in Nelson's battles, would seem almost weird and even ridiculous if compared with those of modern naval warfare. If a hundred and fifty years can make so much difference, we must be prepared for very strange things in the procedure and events of a period, so long back as that of the Mahabharata war.

Another matter to be kept in mind is that we cannot expect, in the books of poets and literary writers, accurate or full details about weapons and tactics, although the narrative may be of battles. Military affairs were in ancient times the sole concern of the military order, the kshatriyas. Their culture and their training were entirely their own charge. The principles and the secrets of warfare and the science and art of the use of military weapons were handed down from generation to generation by tradition and personal instruction. There were no military text-books and there was not much place for them in the works of poets and rishis. If a modern novel deals in some chapters with the treatment and cure of a sick person, we cannot expect to see such details in it as might interest a medical man. No author would care, even if he were able, to include scientific details in his story.

So, we cannot hope to find in the epic of Vyasa, precise details as to what is tortoise formation or lotus formation. We have no explanation as to how one could, by discharging a continuous stream of arrows, build a defence around himself or intercept and cut missiles in transit, or how one could be living when pierced all over by arrows, or how far the armour worn by the soldiers and officers could protect them against missiles or what were the ambulance arrangements or how the dead were disposed of. All these things appertaining to ancient war, however interesting, will have to be in the realm of the unknown in spite of the vivid narrative we have in the Mahabharata epic.

Bhima killed eight of Dhritarashtra's sons early in the battle that day. Duryodhana's heart quailed before this. It seemed to his friends as if Bhimasena would complete his revenge this very day, even as he swore in the assembly hall, where the great outrage was enacted. Arjuna had a great bereavement in this day's battle. His dear son Iravan was killed. This son of Arjuna by his Naga wife had come and joined the Pandava forces at Kurukshetra. Duryodhana sent his friend, the rakshasa Alambasa, to oppose the Naga warrior. Iravan was slain after a fierce fight. When Arjuna heard this, he broke down completely. Said he turning to Vasudeva: "Vidura had indeed told us plainly that both sides would be plunged in grief unbearable. What are we doing all this wretched destruction upon one another for? Just for the sake of property. After all this killing, what joy are we or they likely to find in the end? O Madhusudana, I now see why the far-seeing Yudhishthira said he would be content if Duryodhana would give five villages to us, keeping everything else to himself and he would not resort to fighting if that were agreed to. Duryodhana, in his obstinate folly, refused to give even these five villages and so, these great sins have to be committed on both sides. I continue fighting only because men would otherwise think me a coward, who could submit tamely to wrong. When I see the dead warriors lying on the field, my heart is filled with unbearable anguish. Oh, how wicked we are to carry on in this miserable, sinful way!"

Seeing Iravan killed, Ghatotkacha uttered a loud war-cry which made all the assembled soldiers tremble, and with his division, fell upon the Kaurava army ferociously. So great was the destruction he wrought that at many points the Kaurava formation was broken. Seeing this, Duryodhana personally led an attack on Bhima's son. The king of Vanga joined Duryodhana with his elephants. Duryodhana fought most bravely on this eighth day of the battle. He killed a great number of warriors on Ghatotkacha's side. Ghatotkacha hurled a javelin which would have ended Duryodhana's career but for the Vanga chief's prompt intervention with one of his elephants. The missile hit the beast which fell dead and Duryodhana was saved.

Bhishma was anxious about Duryodhana and sent a large force under Drona to support the Kaurava prince. Many were the veterans who were in this force that attacked Ghatotkacha. So tumultuous and fierce was the fight at this sector of the battle that Yudhishthira feared for Ghatotkacha's safety and sent Bhimasena in his aid. Then the battle became even fiercer than before.

Sixteen of Duryodhana's brothers perished on this day.

CHAPTER LXXII

THE NINTH DAY

ON the morning of the ninth day, before the battle began, Duryodhana was closeted with the grandsire. He gave vent to his bitter feelings of disappointment over the way the battle was going. He uttered words which were like the sharp spears and pained the grandsire greatly but the latter was patient, and said sadly:

"Like ghee on the sacrificial fire I am pouring my life out for you. Why do you seek to mortify me, who have been doing my very utmost for you? You speak like a man of no understanding, not knowing what is right and what is wrong. They say that, when a man is nearing his death, the tree appears to him to be made of gold. You see things now, not as they are; your vision is clouded. You are now reaping the harvest of the hatred you deliberately sowed. The best course for you is to go on fighting, as well as you can. This is also the plain path of duty. It is not possible for me to fight Sikhandin, for I can never raise my hand against a woman. Nor can I with my hands kill the Pandavas, for my mind revolts against it. I will do everything barring these two and fight all the warriors opposed to you. Nothing is gained by losing heart. Fight as a kshatriya should and honour will be yours whatever the events."

Saying thus to Duryodhana and cheering him up with wise and affectionate words, Bhishma proceeded to issue instructions for arraying the forces for the day's battle.

Duryodhana was heartened. He sent for Duhsasana and said to him: "Brother, put forth all our strength in today's battle. I am convinced, the grandsire is fighting on our side with his whole heart. It is only against Sikhandin, he says, he cannot use his weapons. We should see that he is not exposed to Sikhandin's attacks, for you know, even a wild dog can kill a lion if the latter scorns to fight back."

There was a great fight between Abhimanyu and Alambasa. Abhimanyu demonstrated that his valour was no less than his illustrious father's. Alambasa had to flee on foot to save himself.

There were fierce combats between Satyaki and Aswatthama and between Drona and Arjuna. Thereafter, all the Pandavas attacked the grandsire and Duryodhana sent Duhsasana to support the old warrior. Bhishma fought furiously and beat the Pandavas back. The Pandava forces were thoroughly demoralised and were flying hither and thither, like cattle that had lost their way in the forest.

Krishna halted the chariot and said to Arjuna: "Partha, you and your brothers were looking forward to this day, after thirteen years. Do not hesitate to kill the grandsire. Remember the duty of a soldier."

Arjuna bent his head down and, without looking up, replied: "I would much rather have continued to be an exile in the forest than kill the grandsire and the teachers whom I love, but I shall obey you. Drive on."

Arjuna's heart was not in the fight. Unwillingly and in great distress of mind, he proceeded to the combat. Bhishma, on the other hand, burnt fiercely like the noonday sun.

When the army saw Arjuna's chariot proceed towards

Bhishma, it regained courage and order once again prevailed. Bhishma's arrows came thick and fast and covered the advancing chariot so completely that neither horses nor vehicles could be seen. Krishna was unperturbed and drove on with circumspection and skill. Arjuna's shafts hit Bhishma's bow and shattered it many times. But the grandsire went on renewing his weapon.

"You are not fighting, Arjuna, as you should!" exclaimed Krishna, and jumped down in a rage from the chariot and, taking up his discus, he advanced towards the grandsire.

Bhishma saw Vasudeva approaching.

"Hail, O Lotus-eyed One!" he cried. "Blessed am I to be separated from the body by you! Come, come!"

Arjuna jumped down from the chariot and, rushing forward overtook and held Krishna, casting both his arms round him. "Stop, Krishna," he cried. "Do not break your pledge. You have promised not to use weapons in this battle. This is my work. I shall not fail. I shall send my arrows and kill the beloved grandsire myself. Pray, mount the car and take the reins."

Arjuna took Krishna back and the battle was resumed. The Pandava forces had been handled roughly, but now the sun was down in the west and the fighting ended for the day.

CHAPTER LXXIII

THE PASSING OF BHISHMA

It was the tenth day of the battle. Keeping Sikhandin in front of him, Arjuna attacked Bhishma. When Sikhandin's darts pierced his breast, sparks flew from the grandsire's eyes. For a moment the old warrior's anger rose like flaming fire and his eyes glared as if to consume Sikhandin. But, at once, the grandsire restrained himself. He decided not to be provoked into fighting Sikhandin, who was born a woman and to strike whom it seemed unworthy of a warrior. He knew, however, his end was near and calmed himself. Sikhandin went on discharging his arrows, not minding the battle of emotions in his opponent's mind. Arjuna also steeled his heart, and from behind Sikhandin aimed arrows at the weak points in Bhishma's armour, even while the grandsire stood still.

Bhishma smiled as the arrows continued to come down thick on him, and turning to Duhsasana, said: "Ah, these are Arjuna's arrows! These cannot be Sikhandin's, for they burn my flesh as the crab's young ones tear their mother's body." Thus did the grandsire look upon his dear pupil's arrows and, while saying this to Duhsasana, he took up a javelin and hurled it at Arjuna. Arjuna met it with three arrows which cut it to pieces, even as it was speeding through the air. Bhishma then decided to end the combat and made as if to dismount from his chariot, sword and shield in hand, but before he could do so, his shield was cut to pieces by Arjuna's arrows. With arrows sticking all over his body so thickly that there was not even an inch of intervening space, Bhishma fell headlong to the ground from his chariot. As he fell, the gods, who looked on from above, folded their hands in reverent salutation and a gentle breeze, laden with fragrance and cool raindrops, swept over the battlefield.

Thus fell the great and good Bhishma, the son of Ganga—Ganga, who came on earth to hallow it and all it bears. The blameless hero who, unasked, made the great renunciation to give joy to his father, the undefeated bowman who had humbled the pride of Rama of the axe, the selfless worker for righteousness' sake, thus repaid his debt to Duryodhana, and lay wounded to death sanctifying with his life-blood the battlefield. As the grandsire fell, the hearts of the Kauravas also fell along with him.

Bhishma's body did not touch the ground, on account of the arrows sticking out all over his body. His body shone more brightly than ever before, as it lay as on a bed of honour, supported by the shafts that had pierced his flesh. Both armies ceased fighting and all the warriors came running and crowded round the great hero, who lay on his bed of arrows. The kings of the earth stood with bowed heads round him, as the gods round Brahma.

"My head hangs down unsupported," said the grandsire.

The princes who stood near, ran and brought cushions. The old warrior rejected them with a smile and, turning towards Arjuna said: "Dear son Partha, give me a cushion befitting a warrior."

When Arjuna, whose arrows were just then burning the grandsire's flesh, heard those words addressed to him, he took three arrows from out of his quiver and so placed them that the grandsire's head found support on their points.

"Princes," said Bhishma addressing the assembled chiefs, "Arjuna's arrows were indeed what my head required to be supported on. This pillow gives me satisfaction. Now, I must lie thus until the sun turns north. My soul will not depart till then. When I pass away, those of you who may be alive then, may come and see me."

Then the grandsire turned again to Arjuna and said: "I am tormented with thirst. Get me some drinking water."

At once, Arjuna raised his bow, and drawing it to the ear, shot a shaft down into the earth near the grandsire on his right side. Up the opening made by the arrow, there gushed a stream of pure sweet water to the very lips of the dying man. Ganga came up, says the poet, to quench her dear son's burning thirst. Bhishma drank and was happy.

"Duryodhana, may you be wise!" said Bhishma, addressing the Kaurava prince. "Did you see how Arjuna brought me water to quench my thirst? Who else in this world can do such a deed? Make peace with him without further delay. May the war cease with my exit. Listen to me, son, make peace with the Pandavas."

The grandsire's words did not please Duryodhana. Even when dying, the patient does not like medicine. He objects to the bitter taste.

All the princes retired to their camps.

CHAPTER LXXIV

KARNA AND THE GRANDSIRE

When he learnt that Bhishma lay wounded and dying, Karna hurried to the place and fell at his feet and said:

"Eldest of the race, Radha's son, who, through no fault of his, incurred your great displeasure, humbly prostrates himself before you."

When after humble salutation Karna stood up, the grandsire, greatly moved, tenderly placed his hand on Karna's head and blessed him. "You are not Radha's son, young man," he said in loving tones: "You are Kuntidevi's own first born. Narada, who knows all the secrets of the world, himself revealed this to me. Son of Surya, truly I entertained no dislike for you. But I was grieved to see your increasing hatred of the Pandavas although they gave you no cause for it. I know and admire your valour and your open-handedness, and I know also that you belong to the class of Phalguna and Krishna in prowess. It is meet you befriend the Pandavas. Therein lies the right path for you who are their brother. With the closing of my part in this war, may the chapter of your enmity also close. This is my wish, Karna."

Karna listened respectfully and replied: "Grandsire, I know I am Kunti's son, and not charioteer-born. But I have eaten Duryodhana's salt and must be true to him, to be true to my own lineage. It is impossible for me to go over to the Pandavas now. You must permit me to repay with my life, if it so be, the debt I owe to Duryodhana for his love and trust. I have erred greatly in word and deed. You must forgive me for it all and give me your blessings."

The great acharya, who knew all the laws of right conduct, reflected for a while on what Karna said, and replied: "Do then as you wish, for that is the right way."

Even when Bhishma was mortally wounded and lay dying, the battle did not cease. Discarding the grandsire's words of wisdom, the Kauravas resumed the battle.

Deprived of Bhishma's leadership, the Kaurava forces felt like sheep without a shepherd when Bhishma no longer led them. Indeed, even as Bhishma fell wounded, the men shouted:

"O Karna, you are the one left to lead and protect us."

The Kaurava warriors felt that, if but Karna would agree to take up the command, victory was certain. During the first ten days when Bhishma led the forces, the son of Surya kept away from the battle. As already narrated, deeply hurt at the grandsire's contumely, Karna had said: "So long as you are up fighting, I shall keep aloof. If you slay the Pandavas and bring victory to Duryodhana, I shall be glad; and I shall then, taking the king's leave, go to the forest. But, if you be defeated and go to the abode of the brave, I, who am not deemed by you as an adhiratha* will ride my chariot and oppose those whom you deem to be of greater prowess than myself and, defeating them, bring victory to Duryodhana."

Thus had Karna sworn and, with Duryodhana's consent, kept aloof from the battle during the first ten days. Now he went on foot to Bhishma who lay on his bed of arrows waiting for his end and, saluting him, addressed him thus:

"Veteran grandsire, vanquisher of Parasurama, you lie on

---

*Master of chariot warfare.

the field of battle, struck down by Sikhandin. If you, who had reached the summit of right living and were an embodiment of purity itself, must lie wounded in this manner, it is clear that no one can attain in this world what he deserves by his merit. You were the one boat on which the Kaurava princes depended for crossing the flood of their troubles. Heavy indeed will be the blows which the Pandavas will now deal at the Kauravas and great will be their consequent distress. Like fire and wind burning down the forest, Arjuna and Krishna will destroy the army of Kauravas. This is certain. Turn your gracious eyes on me and bless me, who have accepted the command of the forces."

Bhishma gave his blessings to Karna. "You are like the good earth to the seeds, like rain clouds to living beings, ever dependable, firm in your loyalty. Serve Duryodhana and save him. You vanquished the Kambojas for him. You put down the Kiratas of the Himalayan fastnesses for him. You fought the Girivrajas on his behalf and defeated them. Many more things you have accomplished for him. Take charge of the Kaurava army now as your own rich possession and guard it well. May you lead Duryodhana's forces to success! May you have every good fortune! Fight your enemies, go."

Karna, having received the benediction of the grandsire, mounted his chariot and rode to the battlefield. When the valorous Karna entered the field on his war chariot, Duryodhana's joys knew no bounds. His sorrow, at having lost Bhishma, was in some degree alleviated.

CHAPTER LXXV

DRONA IN COMMAND

DURYODHANA and Karna held counsel as to who should be put in supreme command of the forces.

"Well, every one of these princely warriors fighting on your side is great enough to be put in charge of our forces as supreme commander," said Karna. "All these kings are of equal prowess, strength, energy, skill, courage, valour, ancestry and wisdom. They cannot all be put in joint command and, if any of them be chosen, each of the others would feel hurt and may not put forth his whole strength in the cause. Thereby we stand to suffer. So, my advice is that we install Dronacharya, the teacher of all these princes and warriors, as supreme commander. He indeed is the greatest of all those that carry arms today. No kshatriya equals him in the qualities required for leading our army. Let us therefore install him."

Duryodhana agreed that this was the right thing to do, and so it was decided.

Duryodhana went to Dronacharya and, in the presence of the assembled warriors and princes, bowed and addressed him:

"Revered Master, you are unrivalled among all those assembled here in caste, ancestry, knowledge of sciences, age, wisdom, valour and skill. I beg of you to accept the supreme command. Under your command, this army will be victorious."

The assembled kings received this proposal with loud cheers and war cries which gladdened Duryodhana's heart.

Drona was installed in due form amidst thunderous acclamation. The praise of courtiers and the sound of trumpets that accompanied the ceremony, made the Kauravas feel as though they had already vanquished the enemy. So great was their enthusiasm and confidence in Drona's leadership.

Drona arrayed the army in circular formation. Karna, who had till then stood aside was now seen moving about in his great chariot on the battlefield and this put new courage and joy into the hearts of the Kaurava soldiers. The talk went round in the army that the great Bhishma did not wish to slay the sons of Pandu and therefore had not put his whole heart in the fight, but now that Karna was in the field, it was certain that the Pandavas would be destroyed.

Dronacharya was in command for five days of the battle. Though of advanced years, he was everywhere in the field and displayed the fierce energy of a young warrior. Whenever he led an attack, the Pandava forces were scattered like clouds before a storm. He personally engaged the greatest warriors on the Pandava side in battle. He fought Satyaki, Bhima, Arjuna, Dhrishtadyumna, Abhimanyu, Drupada and Kasiraja and defeated them on many occasions. He harassed and inflicted severe punishment on the Pandava army during the five days he was in command.

CHAPTER LXXVI

TO SEIZE YUDHISHTHIRA ALIVE

As soon as Drona assumed command of the Kaurava forces, Duryodhana, Karna and Duhsasana sat in council and decided on a plan, and Duryodhana went to Dronacharya to put it in operation.

"Acharya, we desire that you should capture Yudhishthira alive and give him over to us. We desire nothing more, not even a total victory. If you achieve this for us, we shall all be exceedingly satisfied with your conduct of the war."

When Drona heard Duryodhana address him thus, great was his joy, for he hated the very idea of slaying the Pandava brothers. Even though, to fulfil his obligation, the acharya loyally joined the Kaurava side against the Pandavas, he loved the sons of Kunti and especially the pure-minded Yudhishthira. So, when he heard Duryodhana request that Yudhishthira should be captured alive, he felt greatly relieved.

"Duryodhana, may you be blessed!" the acharya said. "Do you too wish to abstain from killing Yudhishthira? How it gladdens my heart! Truly, Yudhishthira is one without an enemy and the name Ajatasatru, which the people have given to Kunti's eldest son, has been justified by your great decision. When even you have made up your mind that he should not be killed but should be captured alive, his unrivalled glory has become ten times enhanced."

"I see, dear Duryodhana, what you intend," Drona continued. "You wish to defeat the Pandavas in battle and then give them their share in the kingdom and live in peace and amity with them. I see this clearly from your desire to capture Yudhishthira alive."

Drona was exceedingly glad and he said again: "Indeed Yudhishthira is the most fortunate man on earth. The gods are showering their favours on Kunti's good son. So has he won the hearts of even enemies."

But Duryodhana's motives in wishing to take Yudhishthira alive were far different, and as soon as Drona acceded to his proposal and gave his pledge that he would do his best to capture Yudhishthira, he began to reveal his real intentions.

If Yudhishthira were slain, nothing would be gained by it, and the anger of the Pandavas would be all the greater. The battle would rage more fiercely than before, and Duryodhana knew that it would only mean the utter defeat of his army. Even if the fight were to be continued relentlessly until both armies were destroyed, Krishna would still remain alive and he would put either Draupadi or Kunti in sovereign possession of the kingdom. What then was the point in killing Yudhishthira? On the other hand, if Yudhishthira was captured alive, Duryodhana thought, the war would end more speedily and victoriously for the Kauravas. Thereafter, he could surely play on Yudhishthira's goodness and his loyalty to the traditional code of kshatriya conduct. It was pretty certain he could be drawn into the battle of dice again and sent to the forests once more. Ten days of fighting had demonstrated to Duryodhana that further fighting would only result in the destruction of the race, not the fulfilment of the desires. When Duryodhana made his motives clear to Drona, the acharya was greatly disappointed and he cursed Duryodhana in his heart. But whatever the reason for it, he was glad that Yudhishthira was not to be killed.

The news that Drona had given a solemn assurance to Duryodhana that he would take Yudhishthira prisoner, was carried by their spies to the Pandava army. The Pandavas knew that, when the acharya was determined on something and gave his pledged word for executing it, his unrivalled eminence in the art of war and his valour made it a most serious affair. So, they soon got busy and so arrayed the forces that Yudhishthira was never left unsupported. Whatever movements might take place, they always took care to leave sufficient protection against any surprise attack on Yudhishthira.

In the first day's battle under the leadership of Drona, the acharya amply demonstrated his great skill and energy. He moved about destroying the Pandava forces like a fire burning up dry logs. His rapid movements made the Pandava army feel as if Drona was everywhere at the same time showering arrows like rain and converting the battlefield into a stage for the dance of the God of Death.

He cut the Pandava army in twain where Dhrishtadyumna stood. Many were the single combats among renowned warriors. There was a fierce battle between Sahadeva and Sakuni skilled in illusion-warfare. When their chariots broke, they alighted on the ground and, like two hills sprung to life and motion, they struck each other with maces and closed with one another in single combat.

Between Bhima and Vivimsati there was a great battle in which chariots were broken on both sides. Salya fought his nephew Nakula and harassed him exceedingly, smiling most provokingly all the time. But, in the end, Salya had his car smashed and his flag brought down, and he withdrew admitting defeat. Between Kripacharya and Dhrishtaketu there was a battle in which the latter was worsted. So also was there fierce fighting between Satyaki and Kritavarma and between Virata and Karna. Abhimanyu's valour was also demonstrated as he fought Paurava, Kritavarma, Jayadratha and Salya single-handed and made them withdraw.

Then there was a great combat between Salya and Bhimasena in which Salya was defeated and made to retire. The Kaurava forces began to lose courage and the Pandava army, who saw this, attacked the Kaurava army with renewed energy and broke its ranks.

When Drona saw this, he decided to restore lost morale by leading a straight attack on Yudhishthira. His golden chariot went forward, drawn by four noble Sindhu horses, in the direction of Yudhishthira. Yudhishthira answered with barbed arrows, feathered with eagle-feathers. But Drona did not mind, and advanced at great speed. Yudhishthira's bow was cut down and Drona was coming very near. Dhrishtadyumna tried to intercept Drona but in vain. The whole army shouted: "Yudhishthira has been taken!" So near came Drona.

Suddenly, then, Arjuna appeared on the battlefield, the earth rumbling under the wheels of his chariot, as it coursed swiftly over the bloody field, over bones and bodies lying in heaps. Drona held back, for Arjuna had come on the scene.

From Gandiva issued a continuous stream of arrows. No one could see the shafts taken out of the quiver or placed in position. It seemed as if, from out of the great bow, an unending flood of arrows issued without intermission. The battlefield was darkened by flying missiles.

Drona retreated. Yudhishthira was not taken. The battle was stopped for the day and the Kaurava forces went to their camp in chastened mood. The Pandava army marched proudly to camp and behind them walked Kesava* and Arjuna conversing. Thus closed the eleventh day of the battle.

---

*Krishna.

CHAPTER LXXVII

THE TWELFTH DAY

THE attempt to capture Yudhishthira alive failed. Drona was speaking to Duryodhana about this.

"It is clear we cannot succeed in our efforts to seize Yudhishthira so long as Dhananjaya is nearby. It is no want of interest on my part. If by some stratagem we could draw Arjuna away to some other part of the field, I could pierce the Pandava formations and capture Yudhishthira. I promise to seize him and deliver him to you provided he does not flee from the battle, renouncing honour. If he does that, then also we win indeed, do we not?"

The chief of the Trigartadesa who heard Drona say this talked it over with his brothers, and they made a plan. They resolved to take the samsaptaka oath and challenge Arjuna to battle and draw him away from Yudhishthira's side.

Accordingly, together with a large force, they gathered, and sat before the fire, dressed in matted grass, and went through funeral gifts and ceremonies for themselves as if already dead, and took their oath: "Not till we have killed Dhananjaya will we turn back. If we flee in fear from battle, may we be punished as for deadly sin!"

Having adjured themselves thus before the sacred fire, they marched south for that was the direction of Death, and shouted "O Arjuna!" challenging him to battle. It was a great suicide squad organized to achieve what Drona had pointed out to be essential.

Arjuna turned to Yudhishthira and addressed him thus: "King, the samsaptakas are calling me to battle. I am pledged to accept a challenge thus thrown out. Susarma and his men are calling me to battle. I shall destroy them all and return. Permit me to go."

"Brother beloved," said Yudhishthira, "you know Drona's intentions. Keep that in mind and do whatever you think fit. He has promised Duryodhana to take me alive. He is a matchless warrior, brave, strong and skilled in every branch of archery. He knows no fatigue and nothing escapes his watchful eyes."

"King, here is Satyajit, standing in support of you," replied Arjuna. "As long as he is alive and by you, nothing can happen to you." So saying Arjuna asked the Panchala prince Satyajit to stand guard by Yudhishthira's side and marched off like a hungry lion to meet the samsaptakas.

"There, Krishna, see the Trigartas standing, cheerful under the intoxication of their oath, though they know they go to certain death. Indeed they are full of the exultation of approaching swarga." So speaking to his great charioteer, Arjuna approached the large samsaptaka force.

This was the twelfth day of the great battle. It was a fierce fight. After a time, Arjuna's attack began to tell and the Trigartas fell in swathes before him but Susarma reminded them of their oath.

"Heroes, we have taken our oaths before the fire and in the presence of the whole army of warriors. Having sworn terrible resolves, it is unworthy to flinch. Let us not fall into public ridicule." The samsaptakas cheered their leader, and faced Arjuna with the sublime courage of accepted deaths.

"Hrishikesa, they are resolved on fighting to the last. Drive on," said Arjuna.

Driven by Madhusudana* Arjuna's chariot moved like Indra's car in the great war of the gods against the asuras. It went here and it went there and wherever it went, Arjuna's great bow, the Gandiva, scattered death among the doomed Trigartas. The burst of blood in their serried ranks was like the burst of *Palasa* blossoms in a spring-time forest. The fighting was severe. At one time Arjuna's car and flag-pole were immersed in darkness under the downpour of arrows.

"Are you alive, Dhananjaya?" shouted Krishna.

"Yes," replied Arjuna, and pulling the string of his Gandiva, discharged shafts that dispelled the arrow-shower.

It was like the Rudra dance of dissolution. The field was full of severed limbs and headless bodies and presented a terrible spectacle.

As Arjuna proceeded to oppose the samsaptakas, Drona gave orders for a violent assault on the Pandava forces at the point where Yudhishthira stood. Yudhishthira saw this movement and spoke to the Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna:

"The brahmana is coming to seize me. Look after the forces with vigilance."

The son of Drupada did not wait for Drona to advance, but marched forward in his car himself to meet Drona.

---

*Krishna.

Dronacharya avoided Dhrishtadyumna, for well he knew that his death was destined to be at his hands and that death was not yet due; and he wheeled his chariot in another direction where Drupada was leading his forces. Drupada's forces suffered heavy punishment at Drona's hands and blood flowed in streams on the battlefield. Drona, then, again turned his attention to Yudhishthira. The Pandavas stood firm and answered Drona's attacks with showers of arrows. Satyajit made a charge on Drona's car and there was a fierce combat in which Drona's figure assumed the grimness of the Destroyer. Many a warrior was slain by him in succession. Vrika, a prince of Panchala, as well as Satyajit, fell dead.

Seeing this, Satanika, son of Virata, marched against Drona. In a moment, Satanika's severed head rolled on the ground with the golden kundalas shining in the earlobes. Ketama, another chief, followed the attack but he too perished. Then, Vasudhana rushed forward to stop the advance of Drona, but he too fell dead.

Yudhamanyu, Satyaki, Sikhandin and Uttamaujas who came to push Drona back, were repulsed and all these great warriors had to retreat. Drona was now almost within reach of Yudhishthira

At that moment, Panchalya, another son of Drupada, rushed madly up to stop the acharya and fought most desperately. But, he too was mortally wounded and fell from his chariot like a falling star.

Then, Duryodhana was delighted and said exultingly to Karna:

"Radheya, do you see the valour of our mighty leader? No more will the Pandavas be inclined towards battle. See how their army reels under Drona's blows."

Karna shook his head. "Do not be so confident," he said. "The Pandavas are not to be so easily vanquished. They will never surrender. The wrongs they have undergone are too great to be forgotten. You tried to poison and kill them. You tried to burn them alive. You have grieved and humiliated them at the game of dice and you have forced them out to live in the forest for long years. They will not surrender. See there, their army has rallied and all their forces are leading a combined attack on Drona. There, see Bhima, Satyaki, Yudhamanyu, Kshatradharma, Nakula, Uttamaujas, Drupada, Virata, Sikhandin. Dhrishtaketu and other warriors have all come to protect

Yudhishthira and are pressing Drona hard. We should not stand idly watching, when we have put such a heavy burden on the acharya. Great as he is, there is a limit to the load even he can carry. Even wolves combined in large numbers can harass and kill a mighty elephant. Let us proceed. It will not do any longer to leave Drona unsupported."

CHAPTER LXXVIII

BRAVE BHAGADATTA

DRONA made many attempts to take Yudhishthira prisoner, but failed.

Duryodhana led a large elephant division against Bhima. Bhima defended himself from his chariot, with well-aimed arrows. He sent crescent-headed shafts and tore down Duryodhana's flag and cut down his bow even as he held it in his hand. Seeing the king harassed in this manner, the Mlechchha king Anga marched against Bhimasena seated on a huge elephant. But Bhima sent shafts that laid the elephant low and killed the Mlechchha king, which resulted in scattering that section of the Kaurava forces in fear and confusion.

When the elephants stampeded, the horses also took fright and thousands of footmen were trampled under the feet of the elephants and the horses, flying in wild panic.

Seeing this great confusion and the scattering of the Kaurava forces in all directions, the king of Pragjyotisha, the brave Bhagadatta, grew indignant. He got up on his renowned elephant Supratika and charged against Bhimasena. The gigantic beast rushed forward with widespread ears and twirling trunk, crashed into Bhimasena's chariot, and in an instant, horses and vehicle were an unrecognizable mass, but Bhima escaped by jumping off the car in the nick of time. He knew all about elephants. He got below the great and fierce elephant and showered blows on vital points until the great beast got mad and whirled round like a potter's wheel, trying to throw off Bhimasena, who was sticking to its legs and harrying it from below. It bent down and caught Bhima by its trunk and was about to crush him under its knees, when Vrikodara somehow released himself from its hold and again got below, in between its limbs and sticking to the elephant's under-regions, caused exceeding pain to the beast.

Bhima was thus gaining time in the hope that some elephant on the Pandava side would be led to attack Bhagadatta's elephant and enable him to get away. But, when Bhima disappeared from view, being hidden in between the beast's legs, the soldiers thought Bhima was slain. They exclaimed "Bhima is dead! Bhagadatta's elephant has crushed Bhimasena!" and the cry was repeated all over Kurukshetra.

Yudhishthira heard the cry and, thinking Bhima was slain, urged the forces to destroy Bhagadatta. The king of Dasarna charged against Bhagadatta. Dasarna's elephant was also a fierce beast and there was great battle between Supratika and Dasarna's elephant. But Supratika's tusk pierced Dasarna's beast in the side and it crashed down dead. At that moment, Bhima emerged from below Supratika and ran out safe, and the Pandava army cheered when they saw Bhima alive.

Bhagadatta was now attacked on all sides, but he did not lose heart. Resplendent on his elephant, he shone like a forest fire on a hill, as, ignoring the enemies around him, he drove his beast on Satyaki's chariot. The elephant seized the chariot with its great trunk and lifting it high dashed it upside down. Satyaki jumped out of the chariot in time to save himself. His charioteer displayed great agility and skill and saved the vehicle as well as the horses, and righting the chariot, drove it to where Satyaki stood.

Bhagadatta's elephant wrought great havoc in the Pandava army, hurling warriors about and killing them in great number, striking terror wherever it went. Bhagadatta stood on its back, like Indra on Airavata when he fought the asuras. With ears spread out rigid in anger and trunk extended in front, the great beast trampled upon numerous horses, chariots and soldiers and wrought destruction all over the Pandava army. The shafts hurled at it seemed only to incense it more. Like a herdsman in the forest driving the cattle where he would, Bhagadatta drove the soldiers of the Pandava army before him. Bhimasena, equipping himself once again with a chariot, renewed his attack on Bhagadatta. The elephant stretched out its trunk and blew out a violent spray of mucus which scared the horses of Bhima's chariot and they bolted in wild flight and the charioteer could not check them.

A great cloud of dust rose from the field where this great elephant battle raged. Arjuna saw this from where he was fighting the samsaptakas and he also heard the tumult created by Bhagadatta's elephant. He feared things had gone wrong and said to Krishna: "Madhusudana, this is the cry of Supratika, Bhagadatta's elephant. This king of Pragjyotisha is terrible with his elephant, and has no equal in that kind of warfare. He is sure to defeat and confound our men. We must proceed at once and save the situation. We have punished these samsaptakas enough. Drive to where Drona is engaging Yudhishthira."

Krishna drove the chariot accordingly towards the main battle-front.

Susarma and his brothers came up behind the chariot and shouted "Stop, stop." At the same time, they discharged shafts at Arjuna's chariot.

Arjuna was in two minds.

"Here is Susarma challenging me to battle and I hated declining this kind of invitation, but there, to the north of us, our formation seems broken and our men are in need of immediate relief."

While Arjuna was pondering thus, a javelin came hurtling at Arjuna and another towards Janardana. Wild with anger, Arjuna sent three well-aimed shafts, which compelled Susarma to turn back.

They lost no more time but drove quickly to where Bhagadatta was doing havoc. As soon as Arjuna's car was seen, the Pandava forces rallied and soon Arjuna reached the lines where Bhagadatta was. Bhagadatta attacked Arjuna on Supratika like the Destroyer incarnate. But Vasudeva's skill avoided the shock, each time the beast charged.

Bhagadatta showered arrows on Arjuna and Krishna. But Arjuna's arrows broke the elephant's armour and began to hurt the beast. Bhagadatta saw that his elephant could no longer stand the attack and he hurled a javelin at Krishna. Arjuna met it with a shaft from his bow and broke it into two. Bhagadatta then discharged another javelin which struck Dhananjaya's helmet.

Readjusting his helmet, Arjuna bent his bow exclaiming: "Bhagadatta, take your last look at the world and prepare for death!" Bhagadatta was a veteran of very advanced age. His grey hair and the wrinkles on his noble old face gave him the intrepid appearance of a lion; indeed, so old was he that the skin hung loose down over his eyes and he had tied its folds over his forehead with a silk kerchief so that they might not interfere with his sight. Bhagadatta was not more renowned for valour than for purity of character and conduct and was one of the most illustrious among the brave men of his time. Men gave him the title "Friend of Indra" in recognition of his greatness.

"Look around for the last time," said Arjuna to this great man and hurled at him shafts which broke his bow, shattered his quiver and pierced the joints of his armour.

In those days, all warriors wore heavy armour and the secret of hitting weak points such as joints and moving parts was specially studied by kshatriyas and was an important part of military training. When deprived of all his weapons, Bhagadatta hurled his elephant goad at Arjuna. It was sent with deadly aim and charged with the Vaishnava mantra. It would have killed Arjuna, but Krishna came in between and presented himself as a target for the missile. It settled on his chest as a shining necklace. Charged with the mantra of Vishnu, it could not hurt Vishnu but just became the Lord's jewelled garland round his neck.

"Janardana, how is it you have offered yourself as a target for the enemy's missile? You said you would be charioteer and leave all the fighting to me. How could you do this?" protested Arjuna.

"Beloved Arjuna, you do not understand. This shaft would have killed you if it had hit you, but it is really my own thing and came back to its lawful owner," Krishna said and laughed. Then, Partha sent an arrow which entered the head of Bhagadatta's elephant as a serpent enters into the ant-hill.

Bhagadatta tried to urge his great beast forward, but it stood stark rigid, and his loud command went in vain even as the words of man, who has lost his wealth, are disregarded by his wife.

Like a great hill the elephant stood rigid for a moment and then, it suddenly sank down driving its tusks into the earth and yielded up the ghost with an agonised squeal.

Arjuna was somewhat grieved at the death of the noble animal and for his not having been able to slay Bhagadatta, without killing the beast. Arjuna's shafts tore the silken napkin that bound up the folds of the aged king's forehead and he was blinded at once by his own hanging wrinkles. Soon, a sharp crescent-headed shaft came and pierced his chest and Bhagadatta fell like a great tree in a storm, his golden necklace shining like flowers on the uprooted tree. The Kaurava forces fell into utter confusion.

Sakuni's brothers, Vrisha and Achala, tried their best to oppose Arjuna and attacked him in front and rear. But their chariots were soon dashed to pieces and they were themselves stricken dead on the field like two lion cubs. They both looked much alike and equally noble in appearance. The poet says that the bodies of these two valiant heroes who did not flee when the rest fled, shed a strange lustre all around. Sakuni was full of anger when he saw his brave and incomparable brothers lying dead on the field. He attacked Arjuna fiercely and used all the weapons of illusion, in which he was skilled. But Arjuna's strokes broke all the charms and rendered them useless, and Sakuni had to leave the field, as fast as his horses could bear him.

The Pandava forces then attacked Drona's army and wrought great havoc till the sun set, and the twelfth day's fight ended. Drona gave orders to cease fighting and the Kaurava forces, which had lost heavily, retired in sullen dejection to their camp. The Pandava army, on the other hand, was in high spirits and its warriors gathered round camp-fires in cheerful talk and praise of Arjuna and the other heroes, who had led them to victory.

CHAPTER LXXIX

ABHIMANYU

EARLY next morning, Duryodhana went to Dronacharya in a state of bitterness and anger and, after the customary salutation, addressed him thus in the presence of a large number of generals:

"Esteemed brahmana, Yudhishthira was quite within your reach yesterday and, if you had really wished to take him no one could have prevented you. Yet, you did not take him, and to me the events of yesterday are inexplicable. I cannot understand what makes it hard for you to carry out your promise to me. Verily great men are un-understandable."

Dronacharya was exceedingly hurt by this insulting insinuation.

"Duryodhana," he said, "I am putting forth on your behalf all the strength and skill I possess. You entertain thoughts unworthy of a king. As long as Arjuna is present, supporting Yudhishthira, it is not possible for us to seize him. I have told you that already. It is only if we manage somehow to get Arjuna out of the battlefield that we can hope to carry out this plan as you desire and I am devising ways to attain this objective."

Thus did Drona nobly conquer his just anger and seek to comfort Duryodhana in his distress.

On the thirteenth day, the samsaptakas again challenged Arjuna to battle and he accordingly went to attack them, where they were arrayed to the south of the main battlefront. The battle that was fought between the samsaptakas and Arjuna was the fiercest that ever had been seen or heard of till that day.

When Dhananjaya left the main front for meeting the samsaptakas, Drona rearranged his army in lotus formation and attacked Yudhishthira fiercely. Bhima, Satyaki, Chekitana, Dhrishtadyumna, Kuntibhoja, Drupada, Ghatotkacha, Yudhamanyu, Sikhandin, Uttamaujas, Virata, the Kekayas, Srinjayas and many others opposed him, but their resistance seemed paralysed by the violence of Drona's offensive.

Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna and Subhadra, was still adolescent, but had already won recognition as a mighty man-at-arms even as the equal of his father and uncle in battle. Yudhishthira called Abhimanyu and said to him:

"Dear son, Dronacharya is harrying our army greatly. Arjuna is absent and, if we should be defeated in his absence, he will be grieved beyond measure. No one among us has been able to break Drona's array. You know you can do it and no one else. I ask you to take up this task."

"I can do it," replied Abhimanyu. "I have been instructed by my father how to penetrate this formation and can certainly do so. But if, after forcing my way, it should unfortunately become necessary for me to come out, I shall be at a loss what to do, being as yet uninstructed in the art of extrication."

"Valiant boy, break this impregnable formation and open a passage for us. We shall all break in in your wake. We shall be with you to face any danger and no question can arise of your having to come out."

Bhimasena supported Yudhishthira's proposal. "I shall be immediately behind you and enter when you succeed in breaking the enemy's formation. So also will Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, the Panchalas, the Kekayas and the forces of Matsyadesa. Only break the formation as you alone can do: we shall do the rest and smash the Kaurava army."

Abhimanyu thought of his father and Krishna and, feeling encouraged by what had been said by Bhimasena and Yudhishthira, and impelled by his own gallant nature, undertook the adventure.

"I shall please my great father and uncle," he said with enthusiasm. "Let my valour be staked on this."

"May your prowess grow," said Yudhishthira and blessed the youth.

"Sumitra, see Drona's flag flying there! Drive straight and fast to that point," said Abhimanyu to his charioteer.

"Faster, faster!" urged Abhimanyu as they sped along.

"May the gods protect you!" said the charioteer. "Yudhishthira has placed a very great burden on your young shoulders. Think well before you pierce Drona's array and enter. The acharya is unrivalled in skill and experience, while you, though his equal in valour, have not his long years to back it."

Abhimanyu smiled and replied: "Friend, I am Krishna's nephew and son of Arjuna, am I not? Which other has that advantage? Fear dare not approach me! These enemies here have not a sixteenth part of my strength. Drive fast towards Drona's division. Do not hesitate."

The charioteer obeyed.

As the golden chariot to which were yoked beautiful young horses approached, the soldiers in the Kaurava army shouted: "Abhimanyu is coming! He has come!" The Pandavas followed Abhimanyu close behind him.

The Kaurava warriors were perturbed as they saw Abhimanyu's chariot approach them with great speed.

"Here is one greater in valour than Arjuna," they thought and began to lose heart.

Like a young lion on a herd of elephants, Abhimanyu rushed on. There was a ripple in the Kaurava ranks which bent under his headlong onslaught. The bend soon became a break and under Drona's very eyes, the formation was breached and Abhimanyu entered. But the breach closed under the inspiration of Jayadratha, king of the Sindhus, before the other Pandava warriors could force their way in according to plan—and Abhimanyu was alone!

Kaurava warriors opposed him, but they fell like moths in the fire, one after another. Abhimanyu's shafts searched the weak points in the armour of his enemies, and the bodies of soldiers lay strewn on the field like Kusa grass on the sacrificial platform. Bows, arrows, swords, shields, javelins, pieces of harness, chaiot canopies, axes, maces, spears, whips, conchs, along with severed heads and limbs of slain warriors, covered the field.

Seeing the destruction wrought by Abhimanyu, Duryodhana was wroth and rushed in person to oppose the youthful warrior. Drona, having learnt that the king himself was engaged in battle with Abhimanyu, became anxious and sent veterans to protect Duryodhana. With great difficulty, they managed to rescue the king from the boy-hero who, greatly disappointed at the escape of Duryodhana, vented his anger on the warriors that had come to rescue him and put them to headlong flight.

Then, throwing away all sense of shame and chivalry, a large number of veteran warriors made a combined and simultaneous attack on the hero, who found himself alone, surrounded by enemies on all sides. But, even as on all sides a rock receives the rising tide of the sea, Arjuna's son withstood this united ouslaught. Drona, Aswatthama, Kripa, Karna, Sakuni, Salya and many other great warriors in their chariots, equipped with all arms, surged in attack on the young hero, only to be dashed back, baffled and broken. Asmaka rode his chariot at great speed against Abhimanyu's but smiling, Abhimanyu sent his shafts and disposed of him in no time. Karna's armour was pierced. Salya was badly wounded and sat, unable to move, in his chariot. Salya's brother came up in great wrath to avenge his brother's disgrace but he fell and his chariot was broken to pieces.

Thus did Abhimanyu, alone and unsupported, oppose a host of veteran warriors and show the skill in the use of arms which he had learnt from his illustrious father and from Vasudeva, his uncle. Seeing this, the poet says, Dronacharya's eyes were filled with tears of affectionate admiration.

"Was there ever a fighter to equal this boy Abhimanyu?" exclaimed Drona to Kripa, in the hearing of Duryodhana who could not contain his anger.

"The acharya's partiality for Arjuna prevents him from killing Abhimanyu," Duryodhana said, "and he sings his praises instead of fighting him. Indeed, if the acharya were minded to dispose of Abhimanyu, would it take him long to do it!"

Often did Duryodhana suspect and complain in this manner against Bhishma and Drona. Having undertaken a war of adharma, he was often led to speak in this manner and hurt the feelings of the acharyas who stood loyally by him, even when they saw the wickedness of his ways.

Duhsasana roared in anger and exclaiming "this obstinate lad will perish now!" led his chariot forward to attack Abhimanyu.

The chariots of Abhimanyu and Duhsasana made wonderful movement against each other and the battle raged long. Duhsasana was struck senseless in his car, and his charioteer just managed to drive away from the field saving Duhsasana's life.

Karna attacked Abhimanyu with his shafts and harassed him greatly. But one of Abhimanyu's arrows felled Karna's bow and the young warrior followed up this advantage so vigorously that he put Karna and his supporters to flight. The Kaurava forces, when they saw this, were completely demoralised.

The army was in confusion and men fled in all directions, not caring for Drona's shouts of remonstrance, and Abhimanyu destroyed those that stood, as fire destroys a dry jungle in summer.

CHAPTER LXXX

THE DEATH OF ABHIMANYU

THE Pandavas, proceeding according to plan, had closely followed Abhimanyu when he broke into the Kaurava formation, but Dhritarashtra's son-in-law Jayadratha, the gallant king of the Sindhus, swooped down upon the Pandavas with all his forces, and enabled the breach in the formation to be effectively and solidly closed up, so that the Pandavas found it impossible to force their way in. Yudhishthira hurled a javelin and cut Jayadratha's bow, but, in an instant, the Saindhava took up another bow and sent unerring shafts at Dharmaputra. Bhimasena's arrows made deadly work, crashing down the canopy and flagstaff of Jayadratha's car. But the Saindhava was alert and re-armed himself, each time his equipment was broken. He killed Bhima's chariot horses, and the latter had to go into Satyaki's car.

In this manner, Jayadratha, with stubborn valour, prevented the Pandavas from entering in Abhimanyu's wake. The young hero was thus isolated and surrounded by the Kaurava forces.

The son of Subhadra was however undaunted. He attacked all the warriors around him and slew them in great number. Like rivers losing themselves in the ocean, the soldiers that went to attack him, disappeared before his arrows. The Kaurava army reeled under Abhimanyu's onslaughts. Duryodhana's son Lakshmana, a gallant young warrior, then charged on Abhimanyu. When they saw this, retreating soldiers came back and supported Lakshmana, showering arrows on Abhimanyu, like rain falling on a hill. Still, Arjuna's son was undaunted and, his shaft came swift and shining, like a serpent fresh-sloughed, and pierced Lakshmana. The handsome youth, with beautiful nose and eye-brows and hair, lay dead on the field and the Kaurava soldiers were filled with grief.

"To hell with the wicked Abhimanyu," shouted Duryodhana, and the six great warriors, Dorna, Kripa, Karna, Aswatthama, Brihatbala and Kritavarma closed upon Abhimanyu.

"It is impossible to pierce this youth's armour," said Drona to Karna. "Aim at the reins of his horses and cut them off. Disable him thus and attack him from behind."

The son of Surya did accordingly. Abhimanyu's bow was broken by a shaft discharged from behind. His horses and charioteer were killed. Thus disabled, the young warrior stood on the field, with sword and shield, facing his enemies. As he stood dauntless like kshatriyadharma incarnate, he filled the warriors around with amazement. Whirling his sword, he held his own against the numerous warriors who had surrounded him, with a skill that confounded them. It seemed to them as if his feet did not rest on earth and he was on wings in the air.

Drona sent a shaft that broke Abhimanyu's sword. Karna's sharp arrows tore his shield into bits.

Then Abhimanyu bent down and taking up one of his chariot wheels and whirling it like a discus, stood up facing all the enemies that surrounded him. The dust from the chariot wheel covered him and the poet says, it enhanced the natural beauty of the young hero. He fought fiercely like a second

Vishnu with the discus. But soon, the combined onslaught of the warriors that surrounded him, overpowered him. The chariot wheel was shattered to pieces. The son of Duhsasana came up then and closed with him in mortal combat. Both fell down together but Duhsasana's son rose again and, while Abhimanyu was struggling to his feet, struck him with his mace and killed him.

"Subhadra's son who, like an elephant in a lily pond, single-handed worked havoc in the Kaurava army, was thus overpowered by numbers and killed cruelly," said Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra. "And, having killed him, your people danced round his dead body like savage hunters exulting over their prey. All good men in the army were grieved and tears rolled from their eyes. Even the birds of prey, that circled overhead making noises seemed to cry 'Not thus!' 'Not thus!' "

While there was blowing of conchs and cries of victory all over the Kaurava army, Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, did not approve of all this. "This is ignoble," he angrily cried. "Soldiers, you have forgotten your code. Verily, you should be ashamed but, instead, you shout brazen cries of victory. Having committed a most wicked deed, you revel in foolish joy, blind to the danger that is imminent."

So saying, Yuyutsu threw his weapon away in disgust and left the battlefield. This young son of Dhritarashtra feared sin. His words were not sweet in the Kaurava ears, but he was a good man and spoke out his mind.

CHAPTER LXXXI

A FATHER'S GRIEF

YUDHISHTHIRA was plunged in sorrow. "He has gone to the sleep that knows no waking, he who in battle overcame Drona, Aswatthama and Duryodhana and who was like a destroying fire to enemy forces. O warrior that made Duhsasana flee in fear, are you dead? What then is there for me to fight for or win? Why do we want kingdom now? What words of comfort can I offer to Arjuna? And what shall I say to Subhadra, quivering like a cow bereaved of her calf? How can I utter to them vain words of solace that serve no purpose? Truly, ambition destroys the understanding of men. Like the fool who, looking for honey, falls into a precipitous pit below and is destroyed, in my desire for victory I pushed to the battle-front this boy, whose life was all before him in love and joy. There is no fool like me in the world. I have killed Arjuna's beloved son, instead of protecting him during the absence of his father."

Thus was Yudhishthira lamenting in his tent. Around him were sitting warriors, silent in sorrowful thought of the valour of the youthful hero and his cruel death.

It was always the custom with Vyasa to come and comfort the Pandavas, whenever they were in great sorrow. He was their great teacher as well as grandsire. So he appeared now before Yudhishthira. The sage was received with all honour and Yudhishthira, having made him sit, said: "I have tried very hard to find peace of mind, but I am unable to find it."

"You are wise and a knower," said Vyasa, "and it is not meet that you should allow yourself to be lost in grief in this manner. Knowing the nature of death, it is not right that you should grieve like the unlearned." Vyasa proceeded to console the bereaved Dharmaputra: "When Brahma created living beings, he was filled with anxiety. 'These lives will multiply and soon their number will be beyond the capacity of the earth to bear. There seems to be no way of coping with this.' This thought of Brahma grew into a flame which became bigger and bigger until it threatened to destroy all creation at once. Then Rudra came and pleaded for allaying this destructive fire. Brahma controlled the great fire and subdued it into the law that is known to mortals as Death. This law of the creator takes many forms, such as war or sickness or accident and keeps the balance between birth and death. Death is thus an inescapable law of existence, ordained for the good of the world. It is not true wisdom to be impatient with Death or to grieve immoderately for those who die. There is no reason to pity those who pass away. We may have reason indeed to grieve for those who remain."

After saying these words of solace, Krishna-Dwaipayana retired.

Dhananjaya and Krishna were proceeding towards their camp after defeating and slaying the samsaptakas.

"Govinda, I do not know why," said Arjuna, "but my mind is not at ease. My mouth feels parched and my heart is troubled with a great pre-sentiment of loss. I wonder if any calamity has happened to Yudhishthira. Something makes me afraid, Krishna."

"Do not be concerned about Yudhishthira," replied Krishna. "He and your other brothers are safe."

On the way, they halted and did the evening prayers. Remounting the chariot, they proceeded to the camp. As they approached the camp, Arjuna's premonitions of calamity increased.

"Janardana, we do not hear the usual auspicious music in the camp. The soldiers, seeing me from a distance, hang down their heads and avoid my sight. This is strange behaviour on their part. O Madhava, I fear greatly. Do you think my brothers are safe? I am confused. How is it Abhimanyu does not run out to meet us today as usual, accompanied by his brothers?"

They entered the camp.

"Why are you all wearing sad faces? I do not see Abhimanyu here. How is it I see no glad faces? I understood that Drona arrayed his army in the lotus formation. No one among you could pierce it as far as I know. Did Abhimanyu force his way in? If so, he is dead, for I did not teach him how to make his way out of that formation. Has he been slain indeed?"

When their mournful silence, and downcast eyes, that dared not meet his, had confirmed his worst fears, the bereaved father burst into heart-broken lamentation.

"Alas, has my dear boy indeed become Yama's guest? Yudhishthira, Bhimasena, Dhrishtadyumna and great Satyaki, have all of you allowed the son of Subhadra to be slain by the enemy? Alas! What comfort shall I give to Subhadra? What shall I say to Draupadi? And what solace can be given to Uttara and who shall give it?"

Vasudeva spoke to his stricken friend. "Beloved Arjuna," he said, "do not give way thus to grief. Born as kshatriyas we have to live and die by weapons. Death is ever the companion of those who have taken up the profession of arms and go into battle, determined not to retreat. Warriors must be ever ready to die young. Abhimanyu, boy as he was, has attained the happy regions above which grey-haired veterans yearn to reach in battle. Abhimanyu's end is indeed the prescribed and much-desired goal of all kshatriyas. If you give way to grief in this inordinate way, your brothers and other kings will lose heart. Stop grieving and infuse courage and fortitude into the hearts of the others."

Dhananjaya desired to be told the full story of his brave son's end and Yudhishthira related it: "I incited Abhimanyu to enter the enemy's formation, for I knew that he alone could do it among all of us. 'Make your way into the lotus array and we shall follow immediately behind you. This great deed of yours will please the hearts of your father and your uncle,' I said. The youthful hero did accordingly and broke the great formation and made his way in. We went behind him according to plan. But, just then, the wicked Jayadratha came and effectively stopped us. He caused the breach in the formation to be closed up at once and we found ourselves unable to follow Abhimanyu. The Sindhu kept us out, and then,—Oh, shame on kshatriyas who could do this!—a crowd of redoubtable warriors hemmed him in, thus isolated, and slew him."

When he heard the full story, Arjuna was again overwhelmed by grief and he fell on the ground in a swoon.

When he recovered, he took an oath: "Before sunset tomorrow, I shall slay this Jayadratha who caused my son's death. If Drona and Kripa come between him and me these acharyas also shall be overwhelmed and slain!" Saying this, he twanged the Gandiva string, and Krishna blew the Panchajanya. And Bhima said: "This twang of Arjuna's bow and this blare of Krishna's conch shall be, unto the sons of Dhritarashtra, the summons of Death!"

CHAPTER LXXXII

THE SINDHU KING

NEWS of Arjuna's oath reached the enemy. The spies informed Duryodhana's friends that Arjuna, having learnt that Jayadratha was the cause of Abhimanyu's death, had vowed to kill the Sindhu king before sunset next day.

Vriddhakshatra, the illustrious king of the Sindhus, was blessed with a son, who was named Jayadratha. At the time of the birth of the prince, a voice was heard to say: "This prince will attain great glory and he will attain the happy regions above, slain in battle. One who, among the warriors of all ages, ranks among the most illustrious, will in the field of battle, sever his head from the body."

All living beings must die, but hardly any, however wise or brave, welcome it. Vriddhakshatra was grieved to hear the voice declare his son's end. In his disturbed state of mind, he uttered a curse: "He who shall cause my son's head to roll down on the ground, shall have his head burst at that very moment into fragments."

Jayadratha grew up and, when he reached manhood, Vriddhakshatra handed over the care of the State to the prince and retired to the forest, where he spent the evening of his days in austerities in an ashrama near the plain, which afterwards became the Kurukshetra field of battle. When Jayadratha came to know about Arjuna's vow, he remembered the prediction about his death and feared his end was near.

"I do not want to be in this battle any longer. Let me go back to my country," he said to Duryodhana.

"Do not fear, Saindhava," replied Duryodhana. "Here are all these veterans and warriors who will stand between you and danger. Karna, Chitrasena, Vivimsati, Bhurisravas, Salya, Vrishasena, Purumitra, Jaya, Bhoja, Kamboja, Sudakshina, Satyavrata, Vikarna, Durmukha, Duhsasana, Subahu, Kalinga, the Avanti princes, Drona, Drona's illustrious son and Sakuni all these warriors and I myself are here and you cannot be in danger. The whole of my army will have but one task today—to defend you against Arjuna. You should not leave us now." Jayadratha agreed to remain. He went to Drona and said to him:

"Master, you taught me and Arjuna and you know us both well. What is your appraisal of us two?"

"Son, I discharged my duties as teacher and dealt with you both impartially. The instruction was the same to you and to Arjuna, but Arjuna excels because of his superior discipline and his own practice. But, you need not be discouraged by this. You will be placed behind a strong force which Arjuna cannot easily pierce. Fight according to the tradition of your ancestors. Death comes to us all, cowards as well as brave men, and the warrior dying in battle attains with ease the happy regions which others only attain with great difficulty. Discard fear and fight."

Drona, having spoken thus to Jayadratha, proceeded to marshal the forces for the next day.

Twelve miles to the rear of the main army Jayadratha and his detachment were placed in a strongly guarded position. Bhurisravas, Karna, Aswatthama, Salya, Vrishasena and Kripa were there with all their forces. Between them and the Pandava army, Dronacharya arrayed the main Kaurava forces in circular formation. This was backed and supported by a lotus formation which again was supported by a spike-headed force. Beyond this, stood Jayadratha. Drona stood at the head of the circular army, resplendent in white armour and helmet, seated in his great chariot, drawn by beautiful chestnut-coloured horses and his flag waved high, displaying the sacrificial platform and deerskin which formed Drona's banner, inspiring the Kaurava army to utmost sacrifice and valour. Duryodhana saw the army formation and his confidence was restored.

With a force consisting of one thousand armed chariots, a hundred elephants, three thousand horsemen, ten thousand foot soldiers, and fifteen hundred archers, Durmarshana, one of the sons of Dhritarashtra, moved forward the main army and blew his conch and uttered his challenge:

"Where is Dhananjaya of whose wrath and prowess men speak? Let him come forward, and striking against us, like a pot upon a rock, break to pieces before the eyes of warriors."

Arjuna stopped his car at a bowshot and half and blew his conch in answer. Then, conchs blew all over in the Kaurava army.

"Kesava, drive towards Durmarshana," said Arjuna. "We shall pierce the line of elephants."

Durmarshana's army was beaten. Like clouds driven about by a gale, the Kaurava forces were scattered and fled in all directions. When Duhsasana saw this, his anger rose. Leading a huge force of elephants he surrounded Arjuna. Duhsasana was a very wicked man but he was brave also. He fought Arjuna fiercely and the field was strewn with the dead. Finally, he withdrew defeated and went back to join Drona's forces.

Savyasachi's car swiftly proceeded forward and passed Drona.

"Illustrious one, grieving for my son, I have come to wreak vengeance on the Sindhu king. I crave your blessings for the fulfilment of my vow," said Arjuna to the acharya. The acharya smiled and said: "Arjuna, you must first fight and defeat me before you can reach Jayadratha." Saying this Drona discharged a shower of arrows on Arjuna's car. Partha also replied with his arrows but these the acharya parried with ease and sent flaming shafts that hit Krishna and Arjuna. The Pandava then decided to cut Drona's bow and bent his Gandiva for that purpose. Even as he was pulling his bow-string Drona's shaft came and cut the string. The acharya, still retaining the smile on his face, rained a shower of arrows on Arjuna and his horses and chariot.

Arjuna fought back, but the acharya showered his arrows which covered Arjuna and his chariot in darkness.

Krishna saw things were not going at all well and said: "Partha, no more waste of time. Let us proceed. It is no use fighting this brahmana, who seems to know no fatigue." Saying this, Krishna drove Arjuna's chariot to the left of the acharya and proceeded forward.

"Stop, surely you will not proceed without defeating your enemy."

"You are my guru, not my enemy, O acharya. I am in the position of a son to you. There is no one in the wide world that can defeat you," said Arjuna and they proceeded forward at a swift pace by-passing Drona.

Then Arjuna pierced the Bhoja army. Kritavarma and Sudakshina who opposed his passage were defeated. Srutayudha also tried to stop Arjuna's progress. There was a fierce battle in which Srutayudha lost his horses and he hurled his mace at Krishna. His mother had obtained this mace as a result of her offering but the condition attached to the boon operated and it came back and struck Srutayudha himself dead. This is the story of the mace.

Parnasa went through penances which pleased Varuna and obtained from that god a boon that her son Srutayudha may not be killed by any enemy.

"I shall give your son a divine weapon. Let him use it in all his battles. No enemy will be able to defeat him or kill him. But he should not use the weapon against one who does not fight. If he does, the weapon will recoil and kill him. Saying this, god Varuna gave a mace. Srutayudha, when fighting Arjuna, disregarding the injunction, hurled the mace at Krishna who was not fighting but was only driving Arjuna's chariot. The missile hit Janardana's chest and immediately rebounded fiercely back to Srutayudha, and like a demon recoiling fatally on the magician, that commits an error in uttering the spell of power that holds it in thrall, it slew Srutayudha and laid him dead on the field, like a great forest tree blown down by a storm.

Then the king of Kamboja led his forces against Arjuna. After a fierce fight, he lay stretched dead on the field like a great flagstaff after the festival is over.

When they saw the strong warriors, Srutayudha and the king of Kamboja, slain, the Kaurava forces were in great confusion. Srutayu and his brother Asrutayu then attacked Partha on both sides trying to save the situation, and greatly harassed him. At one stage of this battle, Arjuna leaned on the flagstaff, dazed with the wounds he received. But Krishna spoke to him encouragingly and Arjuna recovered and resumed the fight, slaying the two brothers as well as their two sons who continued the struggle.

Arjuna marched on and, killing many more warriors, successfully made his way to Jayadratha.

CHAPTER LXXXIII

BORROWED ARMOUR

WHEN Dhritarashtra heard Sanjaya relate the success of Arjuna, he exclaimed: "Oh Sanjaya! When Janardana came to Hastinapura seeking a settlement, I told Duryodhana that it was a great opportunity and he must not lose it. I told him to make peace with his cousins. 'Kesava has come to do us a good turn. Do not disregard his advice,' I said. But Duryodhana heeded not. What Karna and Duhsasana said seemed to him better advice than mine. The Destroyer entered his mind and he sought his own ruin. Drona deprecated war, so also did Bhishma, Bhurisravas, Kripa and others. But my obstinate son would not listen. Impelled by inordinate ambition, he got entangled in anger and hatred, and invited this ruinous war."

To Dhritarashtra thus lamenting, Sanjaya said: "Of what avail are your regrets now? The life-giving water has all run to waste and you now seek to stop the breach. Why did you not prevent the son of Kunti from gambling? Had you done the right thing then, all this great grief would have been stopped at the source. Even later, if you had been firm and stopped your son from his evil ways, this calamity could have been avoided. You saw the evil and yet, against your own sound judgment, you followed the foolish advice of Karna and Sakuni. Kesava, Yudhishthira and Drona do not respect you now as they did before. Vasudeva now knows that your rectitude is only hypocrisy. The Kauravas are now doing their utmost as warriors, but they are unequal to opposing the strength of Arjuna, Krishna, Satyaki and Bhima. Duryodhana has not spread himself. He is putting forth his utmost strength. It is not meet that you should now accuse him or his devoted soldiers."

"Dear Sanjaya, I admit my dereliction of duty. What you say is right. No one can change the course of fate. Tell me what happened. Tell me all, be it ever so unpleasant," said the old king convulsed with grief. And obedient to the old king's behest, Sanjaya continued his narration.

Duryodhana was greatly agitated when he saw Arjuna's chariot proceeding triumphantly towards the Sindhu king. He rushed to Drona and complained bitterly:

"Arjuna has effected a breach in the great army and has advanced to Jayadratha's position. Seeing our discomfiture, the warriors, protecting the Sindhu king, will surely lose heart. They had believed that it was impossible for Arjuna to get past you and that has now been falsified. He advanced before your eyes and nothing was done to prevent it. You seem indeed bent on helping the Pandavas. I am in great distress of mind.

"Sir, tell me, in what matter have I offended you? Why are you letting me down in this way? If I had known that you would do this, I should not have asked Jayadratha to stay here. It was a great mistake I committed in not letting him go, as he desired, back to his own country. If Arjuna attacks him, it is not possible for him to escape death. Forgive me. I am talking foolishly, distracted by grief. Do go in person yourself to save the Saindhava." To this frantic appeal Drona made answer:

"King, I shall not take offence at your thoughtless and unworthy remarks. You are like a son to me—Aswatthama himself is not dearer! Do what I ask you. Take this coat of armour and, donning it, go and stop Arjuna. I cannot do so for my presence is necessary in this part of the field. See there, the clouds of arrows! The Pandava army is attacking us in great force. Yudhishthira is here unsupported by Arjuna and is this not just the opportunity we wanted? Our very plan has borne fruit and I must now take Yudhishthira prisoner and deliver him to you. I cannot give up this objective and run after Phalguna now. If I go after Arjuna now, our battle array will be hopelessly broken and we shall be lost. Let me put this armour on you. Go in confidence. Do not fear. You have valour, skill and experience. This coat will protect you against all weapons. It will not let any blow pass through your body. Go forth to battle, Duryodhana, in confidence as Indra did, clad in the armour given by Brahma. May victory be yours.”

Duryodhana’s confidence was restored and, as the acharya directed, he went, accoutred in magic armour and accompanied by a large force of soldiers, to attack Arjuna.

Arjuna had crossed the Kaurava army and gone far ahead towards where Jayadratha had been kept for safety. Seeing that the horses were somewhat fatigued, Krishna stopped the chariot and was about to unyoke the tired animals, when the brothers Vinda and Anuvinda came up suddenly and began to attack Arjuna. They were defeated and Arjuna scattered their forces and slew them both. After this, Krishna unyoked the chariot and let the horses roll in the mud. The horses rested for a while and were refreshed. Then, they proceeded again according to plan.

“Dhananjaya, look behind! There comes the foolhardy Duryodhana. What good luck! Long have you suppressed your anger, and now is the time for you to let yourself go. Here is the man who caused all this grief, delivering himself into your hands. But remember he is a great archer, well-versed in bow-lore, and also a keen and strong-limbed fighter.” Thus said Krishna and they halted to give battle to the Kaurava.

Duryodhana approached without fear.

“They say, Arjuna, that you have done acts of prowess. I have not seen this myself. Let me see if your courage and your skill are indeed as great as your reputation,” said Duryodhana to Arjuna as he began to battle.

The combat was fierce indeed and Krishna was surprised.

“Partha, I am astonished,” said Krishna, “How is it your arrows do not seem to hurt Duryodhana? This is the first time I see the shafts proceeding from the Gandiva strike their targets without effect. This is strange. Have your arms lost their power? Or has Gandiva lost its quality? Why do your arrows strike Duryodhana and drop to the ground without piercing him? This is most puzzling.”

Arjuna smiled and replied: “I understand. This man has come accoutred by Drona in charmed armour. The acharya has taught me the secret of this armour, but this man wears it as a bullock might do. You will see some fun now!” Saying thus, Arjuna proceeded to shoot his arrows, first depriving Duryodhana of his horses, his charioteer and his car. Then, Arjuna broke his bow and disarmed him completely. Thereafter he sent needle-like darts which pierced just those parts of Duryodhana's body that were not covered by armour, until he could bear it no longer and turned and fled.

When Duryodhana was thus discomfited, Krishna blew his conch and it sent a thrill of fear in Jayadratha's army. The warriors around the Sindhu king were surprised. They at once got ready in their chariots and Bhurisravas, Chala, Karna, Vrishasena, Kripa, Salya, Aswatthama and Jayadratha—eight of them—arrayed their forces against Arjuna.

CHAPTER LXXXIV

YUDHISHTHIRA'S MISGIVINGS

When the Pandavas saw Duryodhana proceeding in the direction of Arjuna, they attacked the Kaurava army in force so as to hold Drona and prevent him from going to Jayadratha's rescue. So, Dhrishtadyumna led his forces repeatedly against Drona. As a result of all this, the Kaurava army had to fight on three fronts, and was greatly weakened.

Driving his chariot right against Drona's, Dhrishtadyumna attacked him violently. Drona's chestnut horses and the Panchala's dove-coloured ones were entangled with one another and presented a picturesque sight like the clouds at sunset. Dhrishtadyumna threw away his bow and, sword and shield in hand, he sprang upon Drona's chariot. Now standing on the shafts of the vehicle, now on the horses and now on the yoke, he attacked Drona bewilderingly, all the while seeming to scorch him with baleful and bloodshot eyes. Long did this fight go on. Drona pulled his bow in great wrath and sent a shaft, which would have drunk the Panchala's life but for the unexpected intervention of Satyaki who sent an arrow and diverted the acharya's shaft. Drona then turned and attacked Satyaki, which enabled the Panchala warriors to take Dhrishtadyumna away. Drona, hissing like a black cobra, his eyes red with anger, advanced on Satyaki who was among the front rank warriors on the Pandava side and who, when he saw Drona desiring battle, went forward to accept the challenge.

"Here is the man who, giving up his vocation as a brahmana has taken up the profession of fighting and is causing distress to the Pandavas," Satyaki said to his charioteer. 'This man is the principal cause of Duryodhana's arrogance. This man fancies himself a very great soldier and is ever bursting with conceit. I must teach him a lesson. Take the chariot up quickly."

Satyaki's charioteer accordingly lashed the silver-white horses and took the car at a great pace. Satyaki and Drona shot shafts at one another so quick that they covered the sun, and the battlefield was in darkness for a while. The steel shafts swished glimmering like newly-sloughed snakes rushing about.

The chariot hoods and the flagstaffs on both sides were battered down. Drona as well as Satyaki were bleeding profusely. The warriors on either side stood still watching the duel and they did not blow their conchs or raise their war cries or sound their lion-roars. The devas, vidyadharas, gandharvas and yakshas watched the great battle from above.

Drona's bow was broken by a well-aimed shaft from Satyaki, and the son of Bharadwaja had to take another bow and, even as he strung it, Satyaki shot it down again. Drona took up another bow which too was shot down. And so it went on till Drona lost a hundred and one bows without being able to shoot an arrow. The great acharya said to himself: "This man Satyaki is a warrior in the class of Sri Rama, Kartavirya, Dhananjaya and Bhishma," and was glad he had an opponent worthy of him. It was a craftsman's professional joy at skill displayed in the art he loved. For every specially-charged shaft that Drona sent, Satyaki had a ready answer of equivalent quality.

Long did this equal combat continue. Drona of unrivalled skill in archery then resolved on killing Satyaki and sent the fire astra. But Satyaki saw this and, losing no time, sent the Varuna astra to counteract it.

But now Satyaki's strength began to fail and, seeing this, the Kaurava warriors were glad and shouted in satisfaction. When Yudhishthira saw Satyaki was hard pressed, he told those nearby to go to Satyaki's relief. "Our great and good hero Yuyudhana* is being overpowered by Drona. You should go there at once," he said to Dhrishtadyumna. "The brahmana will otherwise slay Satyaki in a few minutes. Why are you hesitating? Go at once. Drona is playing with Satyaki as a cat plays with a bird. Satyaki is indeed in the paws of the Destroyer." Yudhishthira ordered the army to make a powerful attack on Drona.

---

*Another name for Satyaki.

Satyaki was saved with difficulty. Just then, the sound of Krishna's conch was heard from the sector where Arjuna was fighting.

"O Satyaki, I hear Panchajanya," cried Yudhishthira; "but the twang of Arjuna's bow does not accompany it. I fear Arjuna has been surrounded by Jayadratha's friends and is in danger. Arjuna is opposed by forces both in front of him and in his rear. He pierced the Kaurava ranks in the morning and he has not come back yet, though the greater part of the day is gone. How is it that only Krishna's conch is heard? I fear Dhananjaya has been slain and therefore Krishna has taken up arms. Satyaki, there is nothing you cannot accomplish. Your bosom friend Arjuna, he who taught you, is in mortal danger. Often has Arjuna spoken to me admiringly of your great skill and prowess. 'There is not another soldier like Satyaki,' he said to me when we were in the forest. Oh, look there! The dust is rising that side. I am certain Arjuna has been surrounded. Jayadratha is a powerful warrior, and there are many enemy warriors there helping him and resolved to die in defence of him. Go at once, Satyaki." Thus did Dharmaputra speak in great trepidation.

Satyaki, who was weary after his battle with Drona, replied: "Faultless among men, I shall obey your command. What would I not do for Dhananjaya's sake? My life is the merest trifle in my eyes. If you order me, I am ready to fight the gods themselves. But allow me to put before you what the wise Vasudeva and Arjuna told me when they left. 'Until we return after slaying Jayadratha you should not leave Yudhishthira's side. Be vigilant in protecting him. We entrust this to you in confidence and go. There is only one warrior in the Kaurava army whom we fear, and he is Drona. You know his sworn intention. We go leaving Dharmaputra's safety in your hands.' Thus said Vasudeva and Arjuna to me when they went. Arjuna laid this trust on me, believing me fit for it. How can I disregard his command? Do not have any fear about Arjuna's safety. No one can defeat him. The Sindhu king and the others cannot cope with a sixteenth part of Arjuna. Dharmaputra, to whom shall I entrust your safety if I must go? I see no one here who can stand against Drona if he comes to seize you. Do not ask me to go. Consider well before you command me to leave."

"Satyaki," replied Yudhishthira, "I have thought over it all. I have weighed the danger against the need and I have concluded that you must go. You leave me with my full permission. Here is the powerful Bhima to look to my safety. There is Dhrishtadyumna also, and there are many others besides. There is no need to worry about me."

So saying, Yudhishthira placed boxful of arrows and other weapons in Satyaki's chariot and got fresh horses yoked thereto and sent Satyaki uttering benedictions on him.

"Bhimasena, Yudhishthira is your charge. Be vigilant," said Satyaki, and went to join Dhananjaya.

Satyaki met with violent resistance as he proceeded to dash through the Kaurava forces, but he cut his way through bearing down all opposition. But the resistance was very stiff and his progress was slow. When Drona saw Satyaki part from Yudhishthira, he began to assault the Pandava formation without rest or interval, until it began to break and retreat. Yudhishthira was greatly agitated.

CHAPTER LXXXV

YUDHISHTHIRA'S FOND HOPE

"ARJUNA has not returned, nor has Satyaki, who was sent after him. Bhima, my fear grows. I hear the Panchajanya, but not the twang of Arjuna's bow-string. Satyaki, that bravest and most loyal of friends, has not come back with any tidings. My anxiety is increasing every moment," said Yudhishthira to Bhima in great perplexity of mind.

"I have never seen you so agitated," replied Bhimasena. "Do not let your fortitude grow less. Command me as you please. Do not let the wheels of your mind stick in the mud of anxiety."

"Dearest Bhima, I fear your brother has been slain, and it seems to me Madhava has now himself taken up arms. I hear the conch of Madhava but I hear not the resounding twang of Gandiva. I fear Dhananjaya, the unrivalled hero, in whom were centred all our hopes, has been killed. My mind is confused. If you would do as I tell you, go at once to where Arjuna is. Join him and Satyaki, and do what needs to be done, and come back. Satyaki, under orders from me, pierced the Kaurava ranks and proceeded in the direction of Arjuna. You go now and do likewise and, if you indeed see them alive, I shall know it by your lion-roar."

"My Lord, do not grieve. I shall go and let you know they are safe," said Bhima, and immediately turning to Dhrishtadyumna said: "Panchala, you know very well that Drona is seeking, by some means or other, to seize Dharmaputra alive. Our foremost duty is to protect the King. But I must also obey him and fulfil his command. And so I go, trusting him to your care."

"Bhima, do not be concerned. Go with an assured mind. Drona cannot take Yudhishthira without first killing me," said the heroic son of Drupada, sworn enemy of Drona. And Bhima hurried away.

The Kauravas surrounded Bhima in full force and sought to prevent him from going to Arjuna's relief. But like a lion scattering less noble beasts he put his enemies to flight, killing no less than eleven of the sons of Dhritarashtra. Bhima then approached Drona himself. "Stop," cried Drona. "Here I am, your enemy. You cannot proceed further without defeating me. Your brother Arjuna went in with my consent. But I cannot let you go."

Drona spoke thus believing that he would receive the same courtesy from Bhima as he did from Arjuna. But Bhima was furious at hearing these words of Drona, and answered scornfully

"Oh brahmana, it was not with your permission that Arjuna went. He broke your resistance and pierced your battle lines fighting his way through, but he did not hurt you out of pity. But I shall not, like Arjuna, show mercy to you. I am your enemy. Once upon a time, you were our preceptor and were like a father to us. We respected you as such. Now, you have yourself said you are our enemy. May it be so!" Saying this, Bhima aimed his mace at Drona's chariot which crumbled to pieces, and Drona had to take to another chariot. The second chariot too was broken to pieces. And Bhima forced his way through overcoming all opposition. Drona lost eight chariots that day, and the army of the Bhojas, that tried to stop Bhima, was completely destroyed. He proceeded mowing down all opposition and reached where Arjuna was fighting Jayadratha's forces.

As soon as he espied Arjuna, Bhima roared like a lion. Hearing that roar, Krishna and Arjuna were exceedingly pleased and raised yells of joy. Yudhishthira heard these roars and, relieved of his doubts and anxieties, he pronounced blessings on Arjuna. And he thought within himself: "Before the sun sets today, Arjuna's oath will be fulfilled. He will slay the man who caused Abhimanyu's death and will return in triumph. Duryodhana may sue for peace after Jayadratha's death. Seeing so many of his brothers slain, it is possible that foolish Duryodhana may see light. The lives of numerous kings and great warriors have been sacrificed on the field of battle and even the stubborn and narrow-visioned Duryodhana may now see his fault and ask for peace. Will this indeed happen? The great grandsire Bhishma has been offered as a sacrifice. Will this wicked enmity end with it and shall we be saved from further cruel destruction?"

While thus Yudhishthira was fondly hoping and dreaming of peace, the battle was raging with great fury where Bhima, Satyaki and Arjuna were engaging the enemy. Only the Lord knows through what travail the world must evolve. His ways are inscrutable.

CHAPTER LXXXVI

KARNA AND BHIMA

ARJUNA had left Yudhishthira behind to repel Drona's attacks and had gone to make good his word that before sunset Jayadratha would lie dead on the field of battle. Jayadratha had been the main cause of Abhimanyu's death. He it was who had effectively prevented the relief of Abhimanyu by the Pandavas, and thereby caused Abhimanyu to be isolated, overpowered and slain. We have seen how Yudhishthira in his anxiety sent first Satyaki and then Bhima to join Arjuna in his battle against Jayadratha. Bhima reached where Arjuna was engaged and sounded his simhanada. Dharmaputra heard the lion-roar of Bhima and knew that Arjuna was found alive.

It was the fourteenth day and the battle raged fiercely at many points, between Satyaki and Bhurisravas at one place, between Bhima and Karna at another and between Arjuna and Jayadratha at a third. Drona remained at the main front resisting the attack of the Panchalas and the Pandavas, and leading a counter-offensive against them.

Duryodhana arrived with his forces at the sector where

Arjuna attacked Jayadratha, but was soon defeated and turned back.

The battle thus raged long and furiously on more than one front. The armies were so deployed that each side was exposed to danger in its rear.

Duryodhana was speaking to Drona:

"Arjuna, Bhima and Satyaki have treated us with contempt and proceeded successfully to Jayadratha's sector and they are pressing hard on the Sindhu king. It is indeed strange that, under your command, our battle-array should have been broken and our plans completely foiled. Everyone asks how it is that the great Drona with all his mastery of the science of war, has been so badly outmanoeuvred. What answer shall I make? I have been betrayed by you."

Duryodhana thus, once again, bitterly reproached Drona, who replied unperturbed:

"Duryodhana, your accusations are as unworthy as they are contrary to truth. There is nothing to be gained by talking about what is past and beyond repair. Think of what is to be done now."

"Sir, it is for you to advise me. Tell me what should be done. Give your best consideration to the difficulties of the situation and decide and let us do it quickly." Puzzled and perplexed, thus did Duryodhana plead.

Drona replied: "My son, the situation is no doubt serious. Three great generals have advanced, outmanoeuvring us. But they have as much reason to be anxious as we, for their rear is now left as open to attack as ours. We are on both sides of them and their position is not therefore safe. Be heartened, go up to Jayadratha again, and do all you can to support him. It is of no avail to dishearten oneself by dwelling on past defeats and difficulties. It is best I stay here and send you reinforcements as and when required. I must keep the Panchalas and Pandava army engaged here. Otherwise, we shall be wholly destroyed."

Accordingly, Duryodhana went with fresh reinforcements again to where Arjuna was directing his attack on Jayadratha.

The narrative of the fourteenth day's fighting at Kurukshetra shows that, even in the Mahabharata times, the modern tactics of turning and enveloping movements was not unknown. The advantages and risks of such strategy appear to have been fully understood and discussed even in those days. Arjuna's flanking manoeuvres perplexed his enemies greatly. The story of that day's battle between Bhima and Karna reads very much like a chapter from the narrative of a modern war.

Bhima did not desire to fight Karna or remain long engaged with him. He was eager to reach where Arjuna was. But Radheya would, by no means, permit him to do this. He showered his arrows on Bhimasena and stopped him from proceeding.

The contrast between the two warriors was striking—Karna's handsome lotus-like face was radiant with smiles when he attacked Bhima saying: "Do not show your back," "Now, do not flee like a coward," and so on. Bhima was all anger when taunted in this manner. He was maddened by Karna's smiles. The battle was fierce but Karna did everything with a smiling air of ease whereas Bhima's face glowed with rage and his movements were violent. Karna would keep at a distance and send his well-aimed shafts but Bhima would disregard the arrows and javelins falling thick upon him and always try to close with Karna. Radheya did, everything he did, calmly and with graceful ease, whereas Bhimasena fumed and fretted with impatience, as he showed his amazing strength of limb.

Bhima was red with bleeding wounds all over and presented the appearance of an asoka tree in full blossom, but he minded them not, as he attacked Karna cutting bows in twain and smashing his chariot. When Karna had to run for a fresh chariot, there was no smile on his face, for anger rose in him, like the sea on a full moon day, as he attacked Bhima. Both showed the strength of tigers and the speed of eagles and their anger was now like that of serpents in a fury. Bhima brought before his mind all the insults and injuries which he and his brothers and Draupadi had suffered, and fought desperately, caring not for life. The two cars dashed against each other and the milk-white horses of Karna's chariot and Bhimasena's black horses jostled in the combat like clouds in a thunderstorm.

Karna's bow was shattered and his charioteer reeled and fell. Karna then hurled a javelin at Bhima, but Bhima parried it and continued pouring his arrows on Karna, who had taken up a fresh bow.

Again and again did Karna lose his chariot. Duryodhana saw Karna's plight and calling his brother Durjaya said: "This wicked Pandava will kill Karna. Go at once and attack Bhima and save Karna's life."

Durjaya went as ordered and attacked Bhima who, in a rage sent seven shafts which sent Durjaya's horses and his charioteer to the abode of Yama and Durjaya himself fell mortally wounded. Seeing his bleeding body wriggling on the ground like a wounded snake, Karna was overwhelmed with grief and circled round the hero, paying mournful honour to the dead.

Bhima did not stop but continued the fight and greatly harassed Karna.

Karna once again had to find a fresh chariot. He sent well-aimed shafts and hit Bhima who in a fury hurled his mace at Karna and it crashed on Karna's chariot and killed his charioteer and horses and broke the flagstaff. Karna now stood on the ground with bent bow.

Duryodhana now sent another brother to relieve Karna. Durmukha went accordingly and took Karna on his chariot.

Seeing yet another son of Dhritarashtra come to offer himself up to death, Bhima licked his lips in gusto and sent nine shafts on the newly arrived enemy, and, even as Karna climbed up to take his seat in the chariot, Durmukha's armour was broken and he fell lifeless. When Karna saw the warrior bathed in blood and lying dead by his side, he was again overwhelmed with grief and stood motionless for a while.

Bhima relentlessly continued his attack on Karna. His sharp arrows pierced Karna's coat of armour and he was in pain. But he too at once returned the attack and wounded Bhima all over. Still the Pandava would not stop and attacked Karna furiously. The sight of so many of Duryodhana's brothers dying for his sake one after another was too much for Karna. This, and the physical pain of his own wounds made him lose courage and he turned away defeated, but, when Bhima stood up on the field of battle red with wounds all over like a flaming fire and emitted a triumphant yell, he could not brook it but returned to the combat.

CHAPTER LXXXVII

PLEDGE RESPECTED

DHRITARASHTRA, hearing of the slaughter of his sons and the check received by Karna, was desolate. "O Sanjaya, like moths falling in the fire, my sons are being destroyed. The stubborn Duryodhana has led the lads Durmukha and Durjaya, to their doom. Alas, I have lost these boys! The fool said: 'Karna, unrivalled among men for courage and the accomplishment of war, is on our side. Who then can defeat us? Even the gods cannot win a battle against me when Karna is on my side. What can these Pandavas do to me?' But now he has seen Karna beating a retreat when Bhimasena attacked him. Has he seen wisdom at least now? Alas, Sanjaya, my son has earned the undying hatred of the son of Vayu, Bhima, who has the strength of the god of death! We are indeed ruined!"

Sanjaya replied: "O king, was it not you who brought about this unquenchable hatred, listening to the words of your foolish and stubborn son? To you indeed must be traced this greater disaster. You are now but reaping the fruit of your discarding the advice of Bhishma and the other elders. Blame yourself, king. Do not blame Karna and the brave warriors who have done their best in battle."

After thus admonishing the blind king, Sanjaya proceeded to tell him what happened.

Five sons of Dhritarashtra, Durmarsha, Dussaha, Durmata, Durdhara and Jaya, when they saw Karna put to flight by Bhima, at once rushed on the latter. When Karna saw this, he was heartened and turned back to resume his attack. Bhimasena at first ignored the sons of Dhritarashtra and concentrated on Karna. But they became so violent in their assault that Bhima got incensed and, turning his attentions on them, disposed of all five of them. They lay dead on the field, with their horses and their charioteers. The young warriors with their bleeding wounds presented the appearance of a forest with trees uprooted by a strong wind and lying flat on the ground with their beautiful red blossoms.

When Karna saw another batch of princes slaughtered for his sake he fought more grimly than ever before. Bhima too was more violent than before, thinking of all the evil that Karna had wrought against the Pandavas. He used his bow so as to disarm Karna completely. His horses and charioteer were also laid low. Karna now jumped down from his chariot and hurled his mace at Bhima. But Bhima warded it off with shafts from his powerful bow and covered Karna with a shower of arrows and forced him to turn back and walk on foot.

Duryodhana, who watched this combat, was greatly grieved and sent seven of his brothers Chitra, Upachitra, Chitraksha, Charuchitra, Sarasana, Chitrayudha and Chitravarman, to relieve Radheya. They gave battle to Bhima displaying great skill and energy, but fell dead one after another, for Bhima's passion was roused and his attack was irresistible. When Karna saw so many of the sons of Dhritarashtra sacrificing themselves for him, his face was wet with tears and he mounted a fresh chariot and began to attack Bhima with deadly effect. The two combatants clashed like clouds in a thunderstorm. Kesava, Satyaki and Arjuna were filled with admiration and joy as they watched Bhima fighting. Bhurisravas, Kripacharya, Aswatthama, Salya, Jayadratha and many other warriors of the Kaurava army also broke into exclamations, astonished at the way in which Bhima fought.

Duryodhana was stung to the quick and burned with anger. Karna's plight caused him extreme anxiety. He feared Bhima would kill Radheya that day, and sent seven more of his brothers directing them to surround Bhima and attack him simultaneously.

The seven brothers sent by Duryodhana attacked Bhima, but fell one after another, struck down by his arrows. Vikarna, who was killed last, was beloved of all. When Bhima saw him fall dead after a brave fight, he was deeply moved and exclaimed: "Alas, O Vikarna, you were just and knew what was dharma! You fought in loyal obedience to the call of duty. I had to kill even you. Indeed this battle is a curse upon us wherein men like you and the grandsire Bhishma have had to be slaughtered."

Seeing Duryodhana's brothers, who came to help him, slain one after another in this manner, Karna was overwhelmed by anguish. He leant back on his seat in the chariot and closed his eyes unable to bear the sight. Then recovering control over his emotions he hardened his heart and began again his attack on Bhima. Bow after bow was broken up by Bhimasena's shaft, but Karna kept the battle. Eighteen times he had to take up a fresh bow. Karna had long ago discarded his smile and his face showed savage anger even as Bhima's. They now glared fiercely at each other as they fought. Yudhishthira now heard Bhima's roar rise above the tumult of battle, and heartened by it, he fought Drona with increased vigour.

In the renewed and fierce battle between Bhima and Karna, Bhima lost his horses and charioteer. Soon his chariot also was smashed to pieces. Then Bhima hurled his spear at Karna who was in his chariot and as Karna parried it with his shaft, Bhima advanced with sword and shield. But Karna broke the shield at once with his shafts. Then, Bhima whirled his sword and hurled it, and it cut Karna's bow into two and fell on the ground. But Karna took up yet another bow and assailed Bhima with arrows more fiercely than before. Bhima, in a fit of uncontrollable rage, sprang upon Karna. Radheya took cover behind his flagstaff and escaped destruction. Thereupon, Bhima jumped out of Karna's car down into the field of battle where, deprived of all arms, he used the elephants lying dead on the ground to protect himself from Karna's arrows and continued the fight. He picked up anything he could lay hands upon, wheels of broken chariots, the limbs of horses and elephants that were lying about, and hurling them at Karna, kept him engaged without interval, but this could not long continue and Bhima was soon at a great disadvantage. Karna said exultingly: "Foolish glutton, you do not know the science of war; why do you engage yourself in battle here? Go to the jungle and fill yourself with fruits and roots and grow fat. You are a savage, not fit for kshatriya battle. Get away!" Hurling insulting taunts at him, he made the helpless Bhima burn with rage, but mindful of his word to Kunti, forbore from killing him.

"There, Arjuna! See how poor Bhima is being harassed by Karna," said Krishna.

Dhananjaya's eyes burned red with wrath, when he saw the plight of his valiant brother. He bent his Gandiva and discharged his arrows on Karna who then gladly turned his attentions from Bhima to Arjuna. He had pledged his word to Kunti not to kill more than one of the Pandavas and he reserved that option for great Arjuna.

CHAPTER LXXXVIII

SOMADATTA'S END

"THERE comes the valorous Satyaki," said Krishna, the charioteer, to Dhananjaya. "Your disciple and friend is marching up, triumphantly breaking through enemy ranks."

"I do not like it, Madhava," replied Arjuna. "It was not right for him to have left Dharmaputra and come here to join me. Drona is there ever seeking an opportunity to seize Dharmaputra. Satyaki should have stuck to his post there to guard him. Instead, he has come here. Old Bhurisravas has intercepted Satyaki. It was a great mistake for Yudhishthira to have sent Satyaki away here."

There was a family feud between Bhurisravas and Satyaki which made them inveterate foes. It had come about this way. When Devaki, who was to be the blessed mother of Sri Krishna, was a maiden, many princes competed for her hand and there was a great battle between Somadatta and Sini over it. Sini won, and on behalf of Vasudeva he placed Devaki in his chariot and took her away. Since that incident there was feud between the two clans, the Sini family and that of Somadatta. Satyaki was Sini's grandson. Bhurisravas was Somadatta's son. When they found themselves on opposite sides in the Kurukshetra battle, it was natural that, as soon as Bhurisravas saw Satyaki, the old warrior challenged Satyaki to battle.

"Oh Satyaki," cried Bhurisravas, "I know you strut about thinking yourself a man of great prowess. Here now I have you in my power and will presently finish you. Long have I sought for this meeting. Like Indrajit destroyed Dasaratha's son Lakshmana, you will die today and go to the abode of Yama, gladdening the hearts of many a bereaved widow."

Satyaki laughed. "Have done with your vaunting," he interrupted. "Words are not deeds, and do not frighten fighting men. Demonstrate your valour in action and do not indulge in dry thunder like autumn clouds."

After this exchange of words, the battle began, and the combat was as between two fierce lions.

Their horses were killed, their bows were broken, and both were rendered chariotless. They were now standing on the ground fighting with swords and shields, till their shields were hacked to bits and their swords broken. Then they were locked in a deadly embrace without weapons. They rolled together on the ground; they leaped up and they sprang on each other; they fell down again and so the combat went on for a long while.

Partha's mind was at the time concentrated on Jayadratha's movements and he did not watch this combat between Satyaki and the son of Somadatta. But his charioteer Krishna was deeply concerned about Satyaki's fate, for he knew about the family feud.

"Dhananjaya," said Krishna, "Satyaki is exhausted. Bhurisravas is going to kill him now."

Still Arjuna was following only Jayadratha's movements.

"Satyaki who came after an exhausting battle with the Kaurava forces has been forced to accept Bhurisravas' challenge," said Krishna again. "It is a most unequal battle. Unless we help him, beloved Yuyudhana will be slain."

Even as Krishna was saying this, Bhurisravas lifted Satyaki up and brought him crashing to the ground and all the men around in the Kaurava army exclaimed: "Yuyudhana is dead!"

Again Krishna importuned: "Satyaki is lying almost dead on the field, the best among the Vrishni clan. One who came to help you, is being killed before your eyes. You are looking on, doing nothing."

Bhurisravas caught hold of the prostrate Satyaki and dragged him on the ground as a lion drags its elephant prey.

Arjuna was in a great conflict of mind. "Bhurisravas has not been called to battle by me, nor has he challenged me to fight. How can I send my shaft at Bhurisravas when he is engaged with another? My mind recoils from such an act, although it is true a friend who came to help me is being slaughtered before my eyes."

Just as Arjuna finished saying this to Krishna, the sky was darkened by a cloud of arrows sent by Jayadratha. Arjuna replied with a shower of arrows, but he constantly turned with pain to where Satyaki was in the mortal grip of Bhurisravas.

Krishna again pressed Arjuna to consider Satyaki's condition. "O Partha, Satyaki has lost all his weapons and he is now in Bhurisravas' power, helpless."

When Arjuna turned, he saw Bhurisravas with his foot on the prostrate body of Satyaki and sword upraised to slay him. Before Bhurisravas could deliver the fatal thrust, Arjuna shot an arrow which went with the speed of lightning and the next moment the uplifted arm fell chopped off to the ground still holding the sword. Bhurisravas, all amazed, turned and saw who had done it.

"Son of Kunti," he exclaimed, "I had not expected this of you! It befits not a warrior to shoot from behind in this manner. I was engaged in combat with someone else and you have attacked me without notice. Indeed, then, no man can resist the evil influence of the company he keeps, as your unchivalrous conduct proves. Dhananjaya, when you go back to your brother Dharmaputra, what account are you going to give him of this valorous deed? Ah! who taught you this low trick, Arjuna? Did you learn this from your father Indra or from your teachers

Drona and Kripa? What code of coduct was it that permitted you to shoot your arrow at a man who was engaged in combat with another and could not so much as turn his eyes on you? You have done the deed of a low-bred fellow and foully besmirched your honour. You must have been instigated into it by the son of Vasudeva. It was not in your own nature to do it. No one with princely blood in his veins would think of such a dastardly deed. I know you have been incited to it by that contemptible Krishna." Thus did Bhurisravas with his right arm cut off, bitterly denounce Krishna and Arjuna in the Kurukshetra field.

Said Partha: "Bhurisravas, you are old and age seems to have affected your judgment. You accuse Hrishikesa and me without cause. How could I look on doing nothing, when, before my eyes, you were in the act of killing my friend, who came and risked his life in battle on my behalf, one who was like a right hand to me, and whom you were going to stab when he was lying helpless on the ground? I would have deserved to go to hell if I had failed to intervene. You say, I have been ruined by keeping company with Madhava. Who in the wide world would not wish to be so ruined? You have spoken out of confused understanding. Satyaki who was weary and exhausted when he came here and who was inadequately armed, was challenged by you to give battle. You overcame him. Having been defeated, he lay on the ground, powerless. What code of honour enabled you to raise your sword to thrust it into the body of the fallen warrior and slay him? Do I not remember how you cheered the man who killed my boy Abhimanyu when he stood staggering, exhausted and weaponless, his coat of armour torn off?"

Bhurisravas who heard this did not answer but spread his arrows on the ground with his left hand and made a seat for meditation. The old warrior sat in yoga and the sight deeply moved all the Kaurava soldiers. They cheered Bhurisravas and uttered reproaches against Krishna and Arjuna.

Arjuna spoke: "Brave men, I am sworn to protect every friend within bow-shot of me and I cannot let an enemy kill him. It is my sacred pledge. Why do you blame me? It is not right to hurl reproaches without due thought."

After saying this to the warriors in the field who reproached him, he turned to Bhurisravas and said: "O excellent among brave men, you have protected many who have gone to you for help. You know that what has happened is due to your own error. There is no justice in blaming me. If you like, let us all blame the violence which governs kshatriya life."

Bhurisravas, who heard this, lowered his head in salutation.

Satyaki now recovered consciousness and rose. Carried away by the impetuosity of his passion, he picked up a sword and, advancing to Bhurisravas, sitting in yoga on his seat of arrows, even when all around were shouting in horror and before Krishna and Arjuna, who rushed to the spot, could prevent him, with one swift and powerful cut, he struck off the old warrior's head which rolled down, while the body was still in the posture of meditation. The gods and the siddhas, who looked on from above the battlefield, uttered blessings on Bhurisravas. Everyone in the field condemned Satyaki's act.

Satyaki maintained he was right, saying: "After I fell down senseless, this enemy of my family placed his foot on my prostrate figure and attempted to kill me. I may slay him in whatever posture he might choose to be." But none approved of his conduct.

The slaying of Bhurisravas is one of the many situations of moral conflict woven into the story of the Mahabharata to demonstrate that, when hatred and anger have been roused, codes of honour and dharma are powerless to control them.

CHAPTER LXXXIX

JAYADRATHA SLAIN

"The decisive hour has come, Karna," said Duryodhana. "If before nightfall this day Jayadratha is not slain, Arjuna will be disgraced and he will kill himself, for not having redeemed his oath. With Arjuna's death, the destruction of the Pandavas is certain and this kingdom will be ours in unquestioned and absolute sovereignty. Dhananjaya swore this impossible oath in a moment of thoughtlessness, because the gods had willed it that he should be thus destroyed by his own hand. It seems my stars are now in the ascendant. We should not let this opportunity slip. We must see somehow that his challenge fails. The whole thing depends on you. Your great skill in battle is on trial today. Prove yourself this day. See, the sun has sloped down in the west. Within the little time left before nightfall, I do not think it possible for Partha to reach Jayadratha. You, Aswatthama, Salya, Kripa, and I must guard Jayadratha and do all we can to see that he does not fall into Arjuna's hands during the next few hours before sunset."

"My king," Karna replied, "I have been wounded all over by Bhimasena, and am so weary that my limbs have no power in them; still, I shall put forth all the strength that is in me. I only live to serve you."

When Karna and Duryodhana were thus planning, Arjuna was engaged in a great attack on the Kaurava army and putting forth all his strength, so that before sunset he could break through to Jayadratha.

Krishna put his Panchajanya in his mouth and blew a loud note in the rishabha swara, which was the signal for his own charioteer Daruka to arrive at once with his chariot. When it came, Satyaki took his place in it, and attacked Karna vigorously and skilfully, keeping him fully engaged.

Daruka's mastery of driving and Satyaki's archery were such as brought down the gods to witness the combat. Karna's four chariot horses were disabled and the charioteer was unseated. Then the flagstaff was cut asunder and the chariot was smashed. The great Karna stood chariotless and the event produced a great flutter in the Kaurava army. Karna had to run and climb up into Duryodhana's chariot. Sanjaya here tells Dhritarashtra to whom he was relating the incident: "The greatest adepts in archery are Krishna, Partha and Satyaki. There is not a fourth to match them!"

Arjuna broke through the Kaurava opposition and reached Jayadratha. Inflamed by the thought of the slaughter of Abhimanyu, and all the great wrongs inflicted by the Kauravas, Arjuna fought with fury. Savyasachin as he was, he discharged shafts from the Gandiva, now using one hand and now the other, and struck terror and confusion among his enemies, who felt as if Death had come to the battlefield with wide-open jaws.

It is only the poet of the Mahabharata that can describe the combat that raged between Arjuna and Aswatthama and the other great warriors that protected the king of Sindhu. They fought fiercely but were all defeated and could not prevent Arjuna from reaching Jayadratha.

The attack on Jayadratha began and the battle raged long. Both sides were constantly looking westwards, for the day was nearing its end. The Saindhava was no mean foe, and taxed to the full Arjuna's strength and skill were hard put to it. The sun sank towards the horizon and reddened, but the battle did not cease.

"There is but a very little time left. It seems Jayadratha has been saved and Arjuna's challenge has failed. The vow is unfulfilled and Arjuna is going to be disgraced," said Duryodhana to himself in great glee.

Then, there was darkness and the cry went round in both armies: "It is sunset and Jayadratha has not been killed. Arjuna has lost." The Pandavas were depressed and there were shouts of joy in the Kaurava army.

Jayadratha turned to the western horizon and thought within himself, "I am saved!" for he did not see the sun then and thought the time-limit of danger from Arjuna was over.

At that moment, however, Krishna said to Arjuna: "Dhananjaya, the Sindhu raja is looking at the horizon. I have caused this darkness. The sun is still up and has not set. Do your work. This is the moment for it, for Jayadratha is off his guard."

A shaft flew from the Gandiva, and, like a vulture swooping down on a chicken, carried away Jayadratha's head.

"Listen, Arjuna," cried Krishna, "send your shafts in swift relays, so that the head may be supported from falling to the earth and borne into Vriddhakshatra's lap."

And Arjuna sent his wonderful arrows which carried away the head in the air. It was a strange sight.

Vriddhakshatra was in his ashrama sitting in the open absorbed in his evening meditation with eyes closed, when his son's head with beautiful black hair and golden ear-rings gently dropped into his lap. The old king finished his meditation and got up, when the head rolled down and fell on the ground. And, as ordained, Vriddhakshatra's head burst into a hundred fragments. Jayadratha and his father together reached the abode of the brave.

Kesava, Dhananjaya, Bhima, Satyaki, Yudhamanyu and Uttamaujas blew their conchs and Dharmaraja who heard the triumphant noise knew that it meant that Arjuna had redeemed his oath and that the Saindhava had been slain. Then, Yudhishthira led his army fiercely against Drona. It was nightfall, but, on the fourteenth day of the battle the rule of cease-fire at sunset was not observed. As the passions rose from day to day, one by one the rules and restraints broke down.

CHAPTER XC

DRONA PASSES AWAY

ALL those who have heard the story of the Mahabharata know about Ghatotkacha, Bhimasena's famous son by his asura wife. There are two young men among the Mahabharata figures who embody all the qualities of heroism, fortitude, strength, courage, and amiability. They are Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, and Bhima's son, Ghatotkacha. Both of them gave up their lives on the Kurukshetra battlefield.

Towards the latter part of the Mahabharata fight, the hatred roused on both sides did not find satisfaction in battle conducted during the day-time and close at night-fall. On the fourteenth day, when the sun set, they did not cease fighting but went on with it in torchlight. The Kurukshetra field presented a strange sight, the like of which had not been seen before in Bharata Desa. The generals and soldiers on both sides were engaged in battle, with thousands of torches burning and using signals specially devised for night-time.

Ghatotkacha and his troops of asuras who are strongest at night, found darkness an additional advantage and violently attacked Duryodhana's army. Duryodhana's heart sank within him when he saw thousands of his men destroyed by Ghatotkacha and his demon army moving in the air and attacking in weird and unexpected ways.

"Kill this fellow at once, Karna, for otherwise, soon our whole army will cease to be. Finish him without further delay." Thus begged all the perplexed Kauravas of Karna.

Karna was himself angry and bewildered, having just been wounded by one of the asura's arrows. He had with him no doubt the spear of unerring effect which Indra had given to him, but it could be used only once, and he had carefully husbanded it for exclusive use on Arjuna with whom a decisive encounter he knew was inevitable. But in the confusion and wrath of that eerie midnight melee, Karna, impelled by a sudden urge, hurled the missile at the young giant.

Thus was Arjuna saved, but at great cost. Bhima's beloved son, Ghatotkacha, who from mid-air was showering his deadly arrows on the Kaurava army, dropped dead, plunging the Pandavas in grief.

The battle did not stop. Drona spread fear and destruction in the Pandava army by his relentless attacks.

"O Arjuna," said Krishna, "there is none that can defeat this Drona, fighting according to the strict rules of war. We cannot cope with him unless dharma is discarded. We have no other way open. There is but one thing that will make him desist from fighting. If he hears that Aswatthama is dead, Drona will lose all interest in life and throw down his weapons. Someone must therefore tell Drona that Aswatthama has been slain."

Arjuna shrank in horror at the proposal as he could not bring himself to tell a lie. Those who were nearby with him also rejected the idea, for no one was minded to be a party to deceit.

Yudhishthira stood for a while reflecting deeply. "I shall bear the burden of this sin," he said and resolved the deadlock!

It was strange. But when the ocean was churned at the beginning of the world and the dread poison rose threatening to consume the gods, did not Rudra come forward to swallow it and save them? To save the friend who had wholly depended on him, Rama was driven to bear the sin of killing Vali, in disregard of the rules of fairplay. So also, now did Yudhishthira decide to bear the shame of it, for there was no other way.

Bhima lifted his iron mace and brought it down on the head of a huge elephant called Aswatthama and it fell dead. After killing the elephant Aswatthama, Bhimasena went near the division commanded by Drona and roared so that all might hear. "I have killed Aswatthama!" Bhimasena who, until then, had never done or even contemplated an ignoble act, was, as he uttered these words, greatly ashamed.

They knocked against his very heart—but could they be true? Drona heard these words as he was in the act of discharging a brahmastra. "Yudhishthira, is it true my son has been slain?" Dronacharya asked addressing Dharmaputra. The acharya thought that Yudhishthira would not utter an untruth, even for the kingship of the three worlds.

When Drona asked thus, Krishna was terribly perturbed. "If Yudhishthira fails us now and shrinks from uttering an untruth, we are lost. Drona's brahmastra is of unquenchable potency and the Pandavas will be destroyed," he said.

And Yudhishthira himself stood trembling in horror of what he was about to do, but within him also was the desire to win. "Let it be my sin," he said to himself and hardened his heart, and said aloud: "Yes, it is true that Aswatthama has been killed." But, as he was saying it, he felt again the disgrace of it and added in a low and tremulous voice, "Aswatthama, the elephant"—words which were however drowned in the din and were not heard by Drona.

"O king, thus was a great sin committed," said Sanjaya to the blind Dhritarashtra, while relating the events of the battle to him.

When the words of untruth came out of Yudhishthira's mouth, the wheels of his chariot, which until then always stood and moved four inches above the ground and never touched it, at once came down and touched the earth. Yudhishthira, who till then had stood apart from the world so full of untruth, suddenly became of the earth, earthy. He too desired victory and slipped into the way of untruth and so his chariot came down to the common road of mankind.

When Drona heard that his beloved son had been slain, all his attachment to life snapped, and desire vanished as if it had never been there. When the veteran was in that mood, Bhimasena loudly spoke indicting him in harsh words:

"You brahmanas, abandoning the legitimate functions of your varna and taking to the kshatriya profession of arms, have brought ruin to princes. If you brahmanas had not gone astray from the duties belonging to you by birth, the princes would not have been led to this destruction. You teach that non-killing is the highest dharma and that the brahmana is the supporter and nourisher of that dharma. Yet, you have rejected that wisdom which is yours by birth, and shamelessly undertaken the profession of killing. It was our misfortune that you descended to this sinful life."

These taunts of Bhimasena caused excruciating pain to Drona who had already lost the will to live. He threw his weapons away and sat down in yoga on the floor of his chariot and was soon in a trance. At this moment Dhrishtadyumna, with drawn sword, came and climbed in to the chariot and heedless of cries of horror and deprecation from all around he fulfilled his destiny as the slayer of Drona by sweeping off the old warrior's head. And the soul of the son of Bharadwaja issued out in a visible blaze of light and mounted heavenwards.

The Mahabharata is a great and wonderful story. The sorrows of human life are painted with sublime beauty and rolled out in a grand panorama. Behind the story of errors and sorrows the poet enables us to have a vision of the Transcendent Reality. Thus it is that the Mahabharata, though a story, has come to be a book of dharma. This book, in style and substance, is altogether different from tales and romances. In modern novels, dramas and pictures, exciting scenes are enacted, the hero passes through dangers and difficulties and finally marries a woman whom he loves, or else everything seems to go on happily but suddenly things go wrong and terrible misfortune happens and the curtain drops. This is the art-scheme of ordinary sensational stories. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are quite a different kind of artistic creation. When we read them, our inner being is seized and cleansed, so to say, by being passed alternately through joys and sorrows, and we are finally lifted above both and taken to the Transcendent and Real.

CHAPTER XCI

THE DEATH OF KARNA

WHEN Drona died, the princes of the Kaurava army installed Karna as Generalissimo. Karna stood up in his gorgeous war chariot driven by Salya. The dauntless confidence of his bearing and his great renown as a warrior heartened the Kauravas. The battle again began.

Readers of the stars were consulted and the Pandavas chose the propitious hour for grim battle. Arjuna led the attack on Karna, supported by Bhimasena immediately behind his chariot. Duhsasana made a concentrated attack on Bhima and sent a shower of arrows at him. Bhima chuckled and said to himself: "I have this wretch now safe in my hands. I shall today redeem my promise to Draupadi. Too long has my oath waited for performance."

As Bhima thus bethought himself of what Duhsasana had done to Draupadi, the anger within him blazed up uncontrollably and throwing down all his weapons, he jumped from his chariot and leapt upon Duhsasana like a tiger on its prey, hurled him down and broke his limbs. "Wicked beast, is this the wretched hand that held Draupadi by the hair? Here, I tear out the root from your body. If there be any here wishing to help you, let him come forward and try!" Glaring hatefully at Duryodhana as he roared this challenge, Bhimasena tore Duhsasana's arm out and threw the bleeding limb on the battlefield. And then he fulfilled the terrible oath he had taken thirteen years before. He sucked and drank the blood from his enemy's body like a beast of prey and danced on the ensanguined field, mad with passion. "I have done it!" he roared. "The oath I swore against this great sinner has been redeemed. It only remains to redeem my oath as regards Duryodhana. The sacrificial fire is ready. Let that victim also prepare."

The scene made everyone shudder. Even great Karna was shaken as he saw Bhima in this ecstasy of wrath.

"Do not flinch," said Salya to Karna. "It does not befit you to show any sign that may be mistaken for fear. When Duryodhana stands quivering in despair; it is not right that you also should lose heart. After great Duhsasana's death, the army's hope rests solely on you. You must now bear the full burden. Like the gallant warrior you are, seek single combat with Arjuna, and win eternal glory on earth or the soldier's heaven!"

At these words, Karna recovered his mettle. With eyes red with wrath and unshed tears, he bade Salya drive the chariot towards Arjuna.

"Enough of fighting," said Aswatthama addressing Duryodhana earnestly. "Let us terminate this disastrous enmity. Beloved friend, make peace with the Pandavas. Stop the battle."

"What? Did you not hear the words that the stubborn Bhima uttered when like a ravening beast, he drank human blood and danced over my brother's mangled body? What talk can there be now of peace? Why do you speak vain words!" said Duryodhana.

Saying thus, he ordered a fresh disposition of the forces, and gave the command for attack.

Then followed a great battle. The son of Surya sent a dazzling arrow, which spat fire and made for Arjuna, like a serpent with its flaming double-tongue out. Then Krishna, Arjuna's charioteer, at the nick of time, pressed the vehicle down five fingers deep in the mud, so that the serpent-shaft just missed Partha's head but struck off his helmet! Ariuna was red with shame and anger and he fixed a dart on his bow to make an end of Karna. And Karna's fated hour was come, and as had been foretold, the left wheel of his chariot suddenly sank in the bloody mire. He jumped down on the ground to lift the wheel up from the mud.

"Wait a minute!" he cried. "My chariot has sunk in the ground. Great warrior as you are, and knowing dharma as you do, you would certainly not take unfair advantage of this accident. I shall presently set my car right and give you all the battle you want."

Arjuna hesitated. Karna was now somewhat perturbed on account of the mishap. He remembered the curse that had been pronounced on him, and again appealed to Arjuna's sense of honour.

Krishna intervened. "Ha, Karna!" he exclaimed, "it is well that you too remember that there are things like fairplay and chivalry! Now that you are in difficulty, you remember them indeed, but when you and Duryodhana and Duhsasana and Sakuni dragged Draupadi to the Hall of Assembly and insulted her, how was it you forgot them utterly? You helped to inveigle Dharmaputra, who was fond of play but was unskilled at it, to gamble, and you cheated him. Where had your fairplay hidden itself then? Was it fairplay to refuse to give to Yudhishthira his kingdom when according to the pledge the twelve years of forest life and the thirteenth year incognito were duly completed? What had happened to the dharma you appeal for now? You conspired with the wicked men who sought to poison and kill Bhima. You acquiesced in the plot to burn the Pandavas alive when sleeping in the palace of wax into which they had been lured. What had happened to dharma all that time? What did dharma tell you when violent hands were laid on Draupadi and you were looking on enjoying the sight? Did you not then mock at her saying: 'Your husbands have left you unprotected, go and marry another husband'? The tongue, that was not ashamed to utter those words now talks of chivalry. Chivalry indeed! When a mob of you surrounded the young Abhimanyu and shamelessly slew him, was that chivalry? Wicked man, do not talk now of chivalry and fairplay, for you have never honoured them!"

When Krishna was denouncing him in this manner in order to urge Arjuna to prompt action, Karna bent his head in shame and uttered not a word. He silently ascended the chariot leaving the wheel still stuck in the mud and took his bow and sent an arrow at Arjuna with unerring aim and such power that it stunned him for a moment. Karna utilised the respite won, to jump down again and hurriedly tried to lift the chariot wheel up, but the curse was too strong for him and fortune had deserted the great warrior. The wheel would not budge, though he strove with all his great strength. Then he tried to recall the mantras of mighty astras he had learnt from Parasurama, but his memory failed in the hour of his need, even as Parasurama had foretold.

"Waste no more time, Arjuna," cried Madhava. "Send your shaft and slay your wicked enemy."

Arjuna's mind was wavering. His hand hesitated to do what was not chivalrous. But when Krishna said this, the poet says: "Arjuna accepted this command of the Lord and sent an arrow which cut and severed the head of the Radheya." The poet had not the heart to impute this act to Arjuna who was the embodiment of nobility. It was the Lord Krishna that incited Arjuna to kill Karna when he was vainly trying to raise his chariot out of the mud in which it had stuck. According to the code of honour and laws of war prevailing then, it was wholly wrong. Who could bear the responsibility for breaches of dharma except the Lord Himself?

The lesson is that it is vanity to hope, through physical violence and war, to put down wrong. The battle for right, conducted through physical force, leads to numerous wrongs and, in the net result, adharma increases.

CHAPTER XCII

DURYODHANA

WHEN Duryodhana beheld Karna's death, his grief knew no bounds. Kripacharya was deeply moved by Duryodhana's anguish of heart and said: "Moved by ambition and greed we placed too great a burden on friends. They have uncomplainingly borne it and laid down their lives on the battlefield and attained the happy regions above. There is but one course left to you—to make peace with the Pandavas. Do not, O King, any longer continue this ruinous fight."

Even at that moment of deep despair, Duryodhana did not relish this counsel.

"Perhaps, there was a time for that, but it is long past. What talk can there be of peace between the Pandavas and us with all this inexpiable blood between us—the blood of our dearest and theirs? If I surrender in order to escape death, how can I escape the contempt of the world? What happiness can I hope to have in a life so ignobly saved? And what joy can I hope to find in sovereignty, secured by a peace after my brothers and relatives have all been slain?"

These words of Duryodhana were lustily cheered by the others. They supported his stand and they chose Salya and gave him the supreme command from then on. Salya was mighty of limb and as brave as any of the warriors who had been killed. The army was arrayed under his leadership and the battle raged fiercely.

On the side of the Pandavas, Yudhishthira now led the attack personally against Salya. It astonished everyone to see how the man, who was till then the very incarnation of gentleness, fought so furiously.

The battle was equal for a long while, when Yudhishthira hurled at Salya, his spear which went straight and struck him. Like the great flagstaff at the end of a festive function, Salya's body lay lifeless on the field, crimson with blood.

When Salya, the last of the great generals, fell dead, the Kaurava army lost all hope. The surviving sons of Dhritarashtra, however, joined together and attacked Bhima from all sides. He slew them all. The son of Vayu had nourished his burning anger for thirteen years from the time Draupadi was insulted in the Hall of Assembly. He said to himself now: "I have not lived in vain, but Duryodhana still lives," and smiled grimly.

Sakuni led the attack on Sahadeva's division. After a while, Sahadeva discharged a sharp-edged sword-arrow saying: "Fool, here is the reward for your great sin." It went straight and cut through Sakuni's neck like a sword and the head, which was at the root of all the wicked deeds of the Kauravas, rolled on the ground.

Left leaderless, the wreck of the broken army scattered and fled in all directions, pursued and slaughtered to a man by the exulting victors. "Thus utterly was destroyed thine army of eleven Akshauhinis, O! Bharata: out of the thousands of kings, who espoused thy cause in their pride and might, only Duryodhana could be seen on that battle-field, fainting and sore wounded," said Sanjaya, describing the debacle to the blind king.

After doing, in vain, all he could to rally his defeated army, Duryodhana, left almost alone, took up his mace and walked towards a pool of water. His whole frame was burning like fire, and water attracted him. "The wise Vidura knew what would happen and he told us," he said to himself, as he entered the water.

Of what avail is wisdom that comes too late? What has been done must produce its result which has to be suffered. That is the law.

Yudhishthira and his brothers arrived there in relentless pursuit of their great enemy.

"Duryodhana!" exclaimed Yudhishthira, "after destroying family and tribe, would you yourself escape death by concealing yourself in this pond? Where is your pride now? Have you no shame? Come up and fight. A kshatriya by birth, do you shrink battle and death?"

Stung to the quick by these words, Duryodhana replied with dignity: "I have not come here, Dharmaputra, a fugitive for my life. It was not fear that brought me here. I stepped into the water to cool the fire that is raging within me. I neither fear death nor wish to live, but why should I fight? The earth has now nothing left that I came to fight for! All those who stood by me have been slain. My desire for kingdom is gone. I leave the world to you without a rival. Enjoy it in undisputed sovereignty."

"Now, that is really generous, especially after you said you would not allow us even a needle point of land. When we begged for peace and entreated you to give us a portion, you spurned our proposal. Now, you say we may take it all. It is not for kingdom or land that we fight. Must I recount all your sins? The wrongs you did us, and the outrage you perpetrated on Draupadi, cannot be expiated except with your life."

Sanjaya, who related the events to the blind old king, here said: "When your son Duryodhana heard these harsh and cruel words spoken by Dharmaputra, he at once rose from the water, mace in hand."

Stepping out of the pool, the unfortunate Duryodhana said: "Come, one by one, all of you, for I am single. You five will surely not join together and attack me who am alone and without armour, weary and wounded all over."

Yudhishthira replied sharply: "If indeed it be wrong for many to join together and attack a single person, pray tell us condemning Bhima, take into account all the wrongs that the Kauravas have done to the Pandavas. Nothing but error can result if one proceeds to judge conduct without taking into account the chain of events leading up to it. You cannot snatch a particular act out of its context and proceed to give judgment on it alone without gross injustice. The era of Kali has arrived, when the laws of a previous age cannot apply. It was not wrong for Bhima to strike below the navel an enemy who had wickedly contrived against his life on many occasions. It was because of Duryodhana's foul instigation that Karna sent a shaft from behind and broke Abhimanyu's bowstring when he was defending himself against heavy odds. Arjuna's young son was attacked by numerous warriors who surrounded him, when he stood all by himself in the field, deprived of bow and chariot, and in a most cowardly manner, killed him. Duryodhana thought evil and practised deception from the time of his birth and has brought about the destruction of his people. There is no sin in Bhima killing this man. Bhima bore the wrongs done and kept his wrath within himself for thirteen long years. Duryodhana knew well that Bhima had sworn to break his thighs and kill him. When he challenged the aggrieved Pandavas to battle, he knew very well that he invited Bhima to make good his oath. How can you think that it was wrong for Bhima to do this?"

Krishna's words did not change Balarama's opinion, but his anger subsided.

"Duryodhana will attain the happy regions reserved for the brave. Bhima's fame has been tarnished for all time. It will be said among men that the son of Pandu broke the laws of war in attacking Duryodhana. It will remain for ever a great blot on his good name. I hate to stay here any longer." So saying the indignant Balarama immediately left for Dwaraka.

"Yudhishthira, why this strange silence?" asked Krishna.

"O Madhava, it hurt me to see Bhima leap on cousin Duryodhana's mortally wounded body and trample on his head. I see the end of the glory of our race. We were wronged by the Kauravas. I know the full measure of grief and anger in Vrikodara's heart, and don't wish to blame him beyond reason. We have killed Duryodhana, who was afflicted by incontinent greed and poverty of understanding; what boots it now to debate the ethics of it or nicely to weigh the propriety of a much wronged man's revenges?"

Yudhishthira was greatly oppressed in mind. When men transgress the law, extenuations and excuses are of no avail in giving mental satisfaction. Arjuna, of penetrating intellect, was silent. He did not show approval of Bhima's act. Nor did he say anything by way of detraction. The rest of the people, who were there, were however loud in condemnation of Duryodhana and were reminding one another of all his misdeeds and errors. Krishna turned towards them and said: "Warriors, it is not meet we go on declaiming against an enemy who has been defeated and is lying mortally wounded. We should not speak ill of a dying man. He was stupid and brought about his own end. He fell into the company of bad men and was ruined. Let us go."

Duryodhana, who was stretched on the ground in intense agony, when he heard Krishna say this, went into a paroxysm of rage. He half raised himself on his arms in spite of the excruciating pain, and exclaimed: "Wretch! Son of a slave! Was not your father Vasudeva Kamsa's slave? You have no business to sit or move with princes. You speak like a shameless wretch. I saw you instigate Bhima to aim his blow at my thigh! Do you think I did not see you, making as though casually talking to Arjuna, pointing to your thigh, but really indicating to Bhima that he should strike me on the thighs, disregarding the laws of single combat? Till then, it had been equal battle. You have neither pity nor shame. Did you not contrive the death of the grandsire Bhishma through stratagem? You advised Sikhandin to be placed in front when attacking Bhishma, knowing that the grandsire would scorn to fight a woman, and would let himself be mortally wounded without resistance. You brought about the end of Dronacharya through making Dharmaputra utter a falsehood. You were the father of that deadly lie that issued from Yudhishthira's mouth, and made Dronacharya throw his bow away. Did you not look on without protest, and rejoice, when that wretch Dhrishtadyumna attacked and killed the acharya who had stopped fighting, throwing away his weapons, and settled down in yoga posture for meditation on the Supreme? Was it not you who wickedly contrived to make Karna hurl the fatal spear at Ghatotkacha instead of reserving it for Arjuna as he had all along resolved to do? O great sinner, surely it was you who instigated Satyaki to butcher Bhurisravas when his right arm had been foully cut off and he stopped fighting and spread his arrows for a seat for holy meditation. It was you who brought about the death of Karna by inducing Arjuna to attack him in a cowardly manner when he was engaged in lifting his chariot wheel which had sunk and stuck in the mud in the field of battle. Oh worthless man, sole cause of our destruction, the whole world has condemned your act when, by sorcery you made it appear as if the sun had set, and made Jayadratha, the Sindhu king, believe that the day was over and he was past danger, and thus he was slain when he was off his guard."

Thus did Duryodhana pour his denunciation against Krishna and then, exhausted by the pain of his wounds and the violence of his rage, he fell prostrate again.

"Son of Gandhari," said Krishna, "why do you let your anger add to the pain of your last moments? It is your own misdeeds that have brought about your end. Do not attribute it to me. Bhishma and Drona had to die on account of your sins. So also were you the cause of the death of Karna and others. Need I recount all the wrongs that you were guilty of against the sons of Pandu? What punishment can be too severe for the great outrage which you inflicted on Draupadi? The animosities and passions that resulted from your misdeeds cannot be made ground for condemning others. All the deceptions and lapses you charge us with were forced on us by reason of your wicked conduct. You have paid off on the battlefield the debt incurred by your greed. But you are dying the death of a brave man. You will go to the happy regions reserved for kshatriyas who lay down their lives on the field of battle."

"Krishna, I go to swarga with my friends and relatives. But you and your friends will live on earth to suffer," said the stubborn Duryodhana.

"I studied the Vedas. I have given gifts ordained by law and I have reigned supreme over all the sea-girt earth. While I lived, I stood upon the humbled heads of foes. All human joys, such joys as even the Gods cannot despise and kings sigh for in vain, the very pinnacle of power, were mine. Dying now, such death as warriors deem the crown of kshatriya life, I go to meet in heaven my friends and brothers gone before, eager to welcome me. Who is more blest, I, or you who, doomed to linger here, mourning for slaughtered friends in desolate homes, find the long sought triumph but ashes in your mouth?" said Duryodhana and the gods showered flowers down on the dying warrior and the gandharvas played music and the sky was illuminated. Vasudeva and the Pandavas felt small.

"There is truth," said Krishna, "in what Duryodhana said.

You could not have defeated him by fair means. This wicked man was invincible in battle."

CHAPTER XCIV

ASWATTHAMA

WHEN Aswatthama heard how Duryodhana lay mortally injured, and learnt the details of the combat, his righteous anger swelled like the sea. The deception, practised by the Pandavas in order to bring about his father's end, had been rankling in his mind. Now, when he learnt how Duryodhana had been stricken down mortally against all rules of chivalry, he went to the spot where Duryodhana was lying and there took an oath that he would that night send the Pandavas to the abode of Yama.

Duryodhana, who was in the last physical agony of departing life, was transported with joy when he heard Aswatthama take this oath. He immediately ordered those who stood nearby to install Aswatthama as Supreme Commander of the Army with due ceremony and, when that was over, said to Him: "All my hopes are in you."

It was sunset and the forest was in utter darkness when under a big banian tree Kripacharya, Kritavarma and Aswatthama halted for rest. They were so greatly fatigued that Kripacharya and Kritavarma fell fast asleep as soon as they lay down. But Aswatthama did not get sleep, for sorrow, indignation and hatred burnt within him. He was listening to the noises that the nocturnal birds and prowling beasts began to make as the night advanced, as he was turning over in his mind how to execute his promise to Duryodhana.

On the branches of the banian tree, under which the three warriors were resting, hundreds of crows roosted. They were all quiet and asleep until a big owl came and began to attack the birds one after another and kill them. When Aswatthama saw the nocturnal bird of prey tear the helpless crows, he got an idea. The crows that could not see at night flew round and round helplessly and fell victims to the owl that attacked them violently.

"These wicked Pandavas and the Panchala that killed my father and all their supporters can easily be killed by us, if we surprise them when they are sleeping in their tents at night even as this owl is attacking these blind crows. Thus can I avenge the deeds of foul play they have practised on us. I am deeply bounden to this bird of prey from whom I have received the teaching. There is no offence in adopting plans to suit one's altered circumstances. If we can lawfully attack an enemy, when his army is tired or when his forces are scattered, why then should not we, who have lost our armies, attack our enemies when they are asleep? There can be nothing wrong in it. Indeed it is only thus that we can punish and defeat these Pandavas who have achieved successes through foul play. We have no other course open."

Aswatthama made up his mind and he immediately woke up Kripacharya and informed him of his plan. Kripacharya, who heard it, was astonished.

"This can never be," said he. "It is wholly wrong. To attack men who have retired to sleep, has never been done before. It would be an unprecedented crime against the laws of kshatriya conduct. Aswatthama, for whom are we fighting? The man for whose sake we joined in this war, has been fatally wounded and his end has arrived. We have discharged our obligations most loyally. We fought our best for the greedy and wrongheaded Duryodhana but we failed irretrievably. There is no purpose now in our continuing the fight and it is folly to do so. Let us go to Dhritarashtra and the faultless Gandhari, and place ourselves at their disposal. Let us take counsel of wise Vidura also. They will tell us what lies before us to do."

When Kripacharya spoke thus, Aswatthama's grief and indignation increased and he spoke bitterly:

"Everyone feels sure that what he thinks is the only right and proper thing to do. One's understanding naturally limits one's vision. These Pandavas have been guilty of the foulest conduct. They killed my noble and trustful father through a lie. They have killed Duryodhana against the laws of chivalry. I have no doubt in my mind that what I propose to do is quite proper vengeance for all these foul deeds. It is only if I carry out this plan that I can possibly repay my debt to my king and to my father. I have decided on it and I do not propose to alter my plan. I am going tonight to the tents where they are sleeping having cast off their armour and there I will kill the Pandavas and Dhrishtadyumna while they are asleep."

Kripacharya was deeply grieved to hear Aswatthama speak thus: "You have attained a great name among men," he pleaded. "Your spotless character will by this be blemished, even like a milk-white cloth bespattered with blood. Never could it be right to kill sleeping men. Desist from this."

"Sir, what are you talking? These Pandavas butchered my father when he had thrown away all his weapons and had sat down in prayer. These men have breached the embankment of dharma and released the flood, and not a drop of dharma is now left! Karna, who was on the ground putting right the wheel of his chariot, was murdered by these lawless rascals. Bhima has killed Duryodhana with a blow below the navel. What dharma has been left for us to follow? The Pandavas have, once for all, destroyed the barrage of dharma. Why should we make research into law and chivalry when dealing with these ruffians who have attained successes by destroying both? If by killing the sleeping Panchalas, who butchered my great father, I may be doomed to re-birth in the body of a foul bird or of a wriggling worm, I do not care. I seek such a birth!" Saying this and, without waiting for an answer, Aswatthama proceeded to harness his horses and get his chariot ready to start. When he was about to leave, Kripacharya and Kritavarma cried: "Stop. What are you resolved upon doing, Aswatthama? We cannot approve of it, but neither can we desert you in your desperate enterprise. The path you are bent on treading, we shall also follow. The sin you are resolved upon, let us share also." So, they went along with him.

Thus does evil grow! One transgression begets the next and thus evil grows from evil submerging righteousness. Evil flourishes on retaliation.

They reached the Pandava camp. Dhrishtadyumna had doffed his armour and was plunged in deep slumber in his tent. Aswatthama leapt on the sleeping warrior and, before he could put himself into a posture of defence, cruelly kicked him to death.

The same process was relentlessly repeated until all the Panchalas and all the sons of Draupadi were killed one by one when they were plunged in sleep in their tents. After having done this deed, the like of which had never before been considered possible among kshatriyas, Kripacharya, Kritavarma and Aswatthama came out of the tents and set fire to the camp. When the fire spread, the sleeping soldiers were awakened and fled hither and thither in confusion, even like the crows on the banian tree under which they had rested in the forest, and they were mercilessly slaughtered by Aswatthama.

"We have done our duty," said Dronacharya's son. "Let us go and give the glad news to Duryodhana, if we can reach him before he expires. Let him die pleased."

The three of them accordingly hurried to Duryodhana.

CHAPTER XCV

AVENGED

"O, Duryodhana, you are yet alive—hear the news and rejoice! All the Panchalas have been slaughtered. The sons of the Pandavas have also been all done to death. The entire army of theirs has been destroyed. We made a night attack on them when they were asleep. There are only seven survivors now on the Pandava side. On our side, Kripacharya, Kritavarma and I remain."

Thus said Aswatthama to the dying Duryodhana who, on hearing this, slowly opened his eyes and, with struggling breath, gasped out these words: "Aswatthama, you have indeed done for me what neither the great Bhishma nor the valiant Karna could achieve! You have gladdened my heart and I die happy." Saying this, Duryodhana expired.

When he saw the unexpected destruction of his army as a result of the attack during sleep, Yudhishthira gave way to grief and broke down:

"At the very moment of victory, we have been totally defeated. The vanquished have indeed triumphed. Draupadi's children, who survived the onslaught of the formidable Karna, have, by our unwariness, been crushed and destroyed like vermin. We have allowed ourselves to be destroyed like a merchantship which, having successfully crossed the big seas, returns home but capsizes in a ditch and is lost."

Draupadi was overwhelmed by inconsolable grief. She came to Dharmaputra's side and wept. "Is there no one to avenge my children's slaughter, by destroying this great sinner Aswatthama?" she cried.

When she said this, the Pandavas immediately went out in search of the murderer. They looked for him in all sorts of places and found him, at last, on the bank of the Ganga, hiding himself behind Vyasa. When he saw the Pandavas and Janardana approaching, Aswatthama quietly took up a blade of grass and charged it with the mantra of destruction and sent it forward saying: "May this destroy the race of the Pandavas," and it went straight to the womb of Uttara who bore in her the son of Abhimanyu. The race of the Pandavas would have been destroyed thereby but for the intervention of Sri Krishna who saved the child in the mother's womb. This child was Parikshit who was later crowned by Yudhishthira when the Pandavas retired to the forest.

Aswatthama prised out the shining jewel which was part of his head and gave it to Bhima, acknowledging his defeat, and went away to the forest. Bhima took the great jewel and, going to Draupadi said: "Angel of spotless purity, this is for you. The man, who killed your beloved sons, has been vanquished. Duryodhana has been destroyed. I have drunk the blood of Duhsasana. I have avenged the great outrage and discharged my debts."

Draupadi took the jewel and, going up to Yudhishthira bowed and said: "Faultless king, it befits you to wear this in your crown."

CHAPTER XCVI

WHO CAN GIVE SOLACE ?

When the battle was over, Hastinapura was a city of mourning: all the women and children were weeping and lamenting their slain, nearest and dearest. With many thousands of bereaved women accompanying, Dhritarashtra went to the field of battle. At Kurukshetra, the scene of terrible destruction, the blind king thought of all that had passed, and wept aloud. But, of what avail was weeping?

"O king, words of consolation addressed to a bereaved person do not remove his grief. Thousands of rulers have given up their lives in battle for your sons. It is now time that you should arrange for proper funeral ceremonies for the dead," said Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra.

"It is not right to grieve for those who die in battle. When souls have left their bodies, there is nothing like relationship, nothing like brother or son or relative. Your sons have really no connection with you. Relationship ends with death, being only a bodily connection and a mere minor incident in the soul's eternal life. From the nowhere do lives come, and, with death, they again disappear into nowhere. Why should we weep for them? Those who die in battle after a heroic fight go as guests to receive Indra's hospitality. Grieving for what is past, you cannot gain anything in the nature of dharma, pleasure or wealth." Thus, and in many more ways, did the wise and good Vidura try to assuage the king's grief.

Vyasa also approached Dhritarashtra tenderly and said: "Dear son, there is nothing that you do not know and which you have to learn from me. You know very well that all living beings must die. This great battle came to reduce earth's burden as I have heard from Lord Vishnu Himself. That is why this calamity could not be prevented. Henceforth, Yudhishthira is your son. You should try to love him and in that way bear the burden of life, giving up grief."

Making his way through the crowd of weeping women Yudhishthira approached Dhritarashtra and bowed before him. Dhritarashtra embraced Yudhishthira, but there was no love in that embrace.

Then Bhimasena was announced to the blind king.

"Come," said Dhritarashtra.

But Vasudeva was wise. He gently pushed Bhima aside and placed an iron figure before the blind Dhritarashtra, knowing the old king's exceeding anger. Dhritarashtra hugged the metal statue to his bosom in a firm embrace and then the thought came to him of how this man had killed every one of his sons, and his wrath increased to such a pitch that the image was crushed to pieces in his embrace.

"Ha! my anger has deceived me," cried Dhritarashtra. "I have killed dear Bhima."

Then Krishna said to the blind king:

"Lord, I knew that it would be thus and I prevented the disaster. You have not killed Bhimasena. You have crushed only an iron image which I placed instead before you. May your anger be appeased with what you have done to this image. Bhima is still alive."

The king was composed somewhat and he blessed Bhima and the other Pandavas who then took leave of him and went to Gandhari.

Vyasa was with Gandhari. "Oh queen," said the rishi, "be not angry with the Pandavas. Did you not tell them even when the battle began: 'Where there is dharma, there surely will be victory'? And so it has happened. It is not right to let the mind dwell on what is past and nurse one's anger. You must now call to aid your great fortitude."

"Bhagavan, I do not envy the victory of the Pandavas. It is true that grief for the death of my sons has robbed me of my understanding. These Pandavas also are my sons. I know that Duhsasana and Sakuni brought about this destruction of our people. Arjuna and Bhima are blameless. Pride brought this battle about and my sons deserve the fate they have met. I do not complain about it. But then, in Vasudeva's presence, Bhima called Duryodhana to battle and they fought and, knowing that Duryodhana was stronger and could not be defeated in single combat, Bhima struck him below the navel and killed him. Vasudeva was looking on. This was wrong and it is this that I find it impossible to forgive."

Bhima, who heard this, came near and said:

"Mother, I did this to save myself in battle. Whether it was right or wrong, you should bear with me. Your son was invincible in combat and so I did in self-protection what was undoubtedly wrong. He called Yudhishthira to play and deceived him. We had been wronged by your son in so many ways. He would not give back the kingdom, of which he took unlawful possession. And you know what your son did to blameless Draupadi. If we had killed your son on the spot, when he misbehaved in the Hall of Assembly, surely you would not have blamed us. Bound by Dharmaraja's vow, we restrained ourselves with difficulty then. We have since discharged honour's debt and found satisfaction in battle. Mother, you should forgive me."

"Dear son, if you had left but one out of my hundred sons and killed all the rest and satisfied your anger, I and my old husband would have found solace in that surviving son for the rest of our lives. Where is Dharmaputra? Call him." she said.

Hearing this, Yudhishthira trembled as he, with clasped hands, approached Gandhari, whose eyes were bound in napkin in loyal lifelong penance for her husband's blindness. He bowed low before her and said softly:

"Queen, the cruel Yudhishthira, who killed your sons, stands before you fit to be cursed. Do curse me who have committed great sin. I care not for life or for kingdom." Saying this, he fell on the ground and touched her feet.

Gandhari heaved a deep sigh and stood mute. She turned her head aside knowing that if, through the cloth with which her eyes were bound, her vision fell on the prostrate Yudhishthira he would be reduced to ashes on the spot. But through a little space in the napkin, even as she turned her face away, her eyes fell on the toe of the prostrate Yudhishthira. At once, says the poet, the toe was charred black.

Arjuna knew the power of bereaved Gandhari's wrath, and hid himself behind Vasudeva.

The wise and good Gandhari suppressed all her anger and blessed the Pandavas and sent them to Kunti.

Gandhari turned to Draupadi, who was in lamentation, having lost all her sons. "Dear girl," said Gandhari. "do not grieve. Who can give solace to you and me? It is through my fault that this great tribe has been destroyed altogether."

CHAPTER XCVII

YUDHISHTHIRA'S ANGUISH

THE Pandavas performed the til-and-water ceremonies for the peace of the souls of the dead warriors and camped on the bank of the Ganga for a month.

One day, Narada appeared before Yudhishthira. "Son, through Krishna's grace, the valour of Arjuna and the power of your dharma, you were victorious and you are sovereign Lord of the Land. Are you happy?" he asked.

Yudhishthira replied: "Bhagavan, it is true the kingdom has come into my possession. But my kinsmen are all gone. We have lost sons that were dear. This victory appears to me but a great defeat. O Narada, we took our own brother for an enemy and killed him, even Karna who stood rooted like a rock in his honour and at whose valour the world wondered. This terrible act of slaying our own brothers was the result of our sinful attachment to our possessions. He, on the other hand, kept the promise he gave to our mother and abstained from killing us. Oh! I am a sinner, a low fellow who murdered his own brother. My mind is troubled greatly at this thought. Karna's feet were so much like our mother's feet. In the large hall, when that great outrage was committed and my anger rose, when I looked at his feet, which were so much like Kunti's feet, my wrath subsided. I remember that now and my grief increases." So saying, Yudhishthira heaved a deep sigh. Narada told him all about Karna and the curses that had been pronounced on him on various occasions.

Once, when Karna saw that Arjuna was superior to him in archery, he approached Drona and entreated him to teach him how to wield the Brahmastra. Drona declined saying it was not open to him to instruct any but a brahmana of faultless conduct or a kshatriya who had purified himself by much penance. Thereupon, Karna went to the Mahendra hills and deceived Parasurama by saying that he was a brahmana and became his disciple. From him he obtained instruction in archery and the use of many astras.

One day, when Karna was practising with his bow in the forest near Parasurama's asrama, a brahmana's cow was accidentally hit and killed. The brahmana was angry and uttered a curse on Karna: "In battle, your chariot-wheels will stick in the mud and you will be done to death, even like this innocent cow which you have killed."

Parasurama was exceedingly fond of Karna and taught him all the archery he knew and instructed him fully in the use and the withdrawing of the Brahmastra. One day, however, he discovered that the disciple was not a brahmana. It happened thus: an insect bit a hole into Karna's thigh when, one afternoon the teacher had fallen asleep on Karna's lap. Karna bore the acute pain quietly and did not stir, lest the master should wake up. The warm blood trickling from the wound woke up Parasurama. When he saw what had happened, he was angry.

"You are a kshatriya; otherwise you could not have borne this physical pain without stirring. Tell me the truth. You are not a brahmana. You have deceived your teacher. Fool! When your hour comes, your knowledge of astras will fail you and what you have learnt from me through deception will not avail you."

Parasurama's wrath against kshatriyas is well known and, when he discovered that Karna was a kshatriya, he cursed him thus in his anger.

Karna was free in making gifts. One day, Indra, who was Arjuna's father, came in the garb of a brahmana and begged of Karna for a gift of the divine earrings and armour with which he had been born. Karna took them out and gave them away accordingly. From that time, Karna's strength was reduced.

"Karna's pledge to his mother Kunti that he would not kill more than one of the five of you, Parasurama's curse, the anger of the brahmana whose cow was killed by Karna, the way in which his charioteer Salya depressed him by underrating his valour and Vasudeva's stratagems, these combined to bring about Karna's end. Do not grieve believing that you alone caused his death." Thus said Narada, but Yudhishthira was not consoled by these words.

"Do not blame yourself, son, for Karna's death," said Kunti. "His father, the sun lord himself, pleaded with him. He begged of him to give up the wicked-hearted Duryodhana and join you. I too tried hard. But he would not listen to us. He brought his end on himself."

"You deceived us, mother" said Yudhishthira, "by hiding the secret of his birth from us. You became thus the cause of this great sin. May women never be able to keep a secret henceforth."

This is the poet's story of how Yudhishthira cursed all women in his anguish over having killed his own elder brother. It is a common notion that women cannot keep secrets, and this story is a beautiful conception illustrating that popular belief. It may be that in worldly affairs, it is an advantage to be able to keep secrets, but it is not great virtue from the point of view of moral character, and women need not grieve over an incapacity of this kind, if indeed Kunti's legacy still persists. The affectionate temperament natural to women may perhaps incline them to openness.

But some women do keep secrets very well indeed, and not all men possess this ability either. It is a fallacy to attribute the differences that arise out of training and occupation on nature itself and imagine some qualities as peculiar to sex.

CHAPTER XCVIII

YUDHISHTHIRA COMFORTED

YUDHISHTHIRA'S pain of mind increased every day as he thought of all the kinsmen that had been killed. He was stricken with intense remorse and decided he must give up the world go to the forest and do penance to expiate his sin.

"I see no joy or good," he said to his brothers, in taking up the office of king or in worldly enjoyment. Do rule the land yourselves leaving me free to go to the forest."

Arjuna talked of the nobility of family life and all the good one may do without taking sanyasa. Bhimasena also spoke and harshly.

"You talk, alas!" he said, "like a dull-witted person who has committed to memory the texts of the sastras without understanding their sense. Sanyasa is not the dharma of kshatriyas. The duty of a kshatriya is to live an active life and perform his proper task, not to go to the forest renouncing activity."

Nakula also contested the propriety of Dharmaputra's proposal and insisted that the path of work was the right one to follow and the way of sanyasa was beset with difficulties. Sahadeva also argued likewise and entreated: "You are my father, my mother, my teacher, as well as brother. Do not leave us, bear with us."

Draupadi also spoke. "It was right we killed Duryodhana and his men. Why should we regret it? Among the duties of a king is included the inflicting of just punishment. It cannot be avoided and is an essential part of the ruler's duty. You have meted just punishment to evil-doers. There is no cause whatsoever for contrition. It is now your sacred duty to take up the burden of governing the land according to dharma. Cease grieving."

Then Vyasa spoke to Yudhishthira at length and explained where his duty lay, pointing out precedents, and persuaded him to go to the city and take up the burden of ruling the land.

Yudhishthira was duly crowned at Hastinapura. Before taking up the duties of the State, Yudhishthira went to where Bhishma lay on his bed of arrows awaiting his death, and took his blessing and instruction in dharma.

This instruction of Bhishmacharya to king Yudhishthira is the famous Santiparva of the Mahabharata.

After the discourse was over, Bhishma's soul passed out. The king went to the Ganga and offered libations, in accordance with ancient custom, for the peace of the departed soul. After the ceremony was over, Yudhishthira went up the bank. There, as he stood for a while, all the tragic events came back to his mind, and overcome by intense grief, he fell senseless on the ground, like an elephant struck down by the hunter.

Bhima went up to his big brother and caressed him tenderly and spoke to him soothing words. Dhritarashtra also came up and said to Yudhishthira: "You should not grieve like this. Arise and, assisted by your brothers and friends, reign over the kingdom that awaits your rule. Your duty now is to do what appertains to the office of king. Leave grief to me and Gandhari. You achieved victory in battle in accordance with the dharma of warriors. The duties appertaining to that victory await your attention now. Fool that I was, I did not pay heed to the words of Vidura and committed a great error. I listened to the ignorant words of Duryodhana and deceived myself. Like gold seen in a dream the glory has vanished, my hundred sons have disappeared into the world of nowhere. But I have you as my son now. Do not grieve."

CHAPTER XCIX

ENVY

AFTER the libation ceremony for Bhishma was over, Vyasa narrated to grief-stricken Yudhishthira an episode in Brihaspati's life.

The wisest of men are sometimes affected by envy and suffer thereby. Brihaspati, teacher to the gods themselves, was master of all knowledge. He was learned in all the Vedas and all the sciences, yet he was once the victim of this debasing emotion and suffered disgrace.

Brihaspati had a younger brother, Samvarta, who was also a person of great learning and a very good man. Brihaspati was, for this reason, stricken with envy of his brother. In this world men become envious of others, just because the others are good, while they themselves are not so good, and they cannot bear this. It is strange indeed that men should not suffer even virtue in others. Samvarta was harassed by Brihaspati in many ways. When he could not stand it any more, poor Samvarta put on the appearance of an eccentric and wandered from place to place, and spent his days in that way to escape from his brother's persecution.

King Marutta of the Ikshwaku dynasty made great penance and obtained from the Lord of Kailasa a great gold mine in the Himalayas and, with his resources thus augmented, he decided to perform a great yajna. Marutta requested Brihaspati to conduct the yajna for him. But Brihaspati feared that Marutta would, as a result of the yajna, overshadow the gods who were his charge. He refused to comply with the king's invitation, despite his pressing entreaties. Thereupon, king Marutta, who had come to know about Samvarta found his whereabouts and approached him with the invitation to conduct his yajna. He at first refused and tried to avoid the honour, but finally yielded. This further increased Brihaspati's envy of his unfortunate brother.

"Here is this enemy of mine, Samvarta, going to conduct king Marutta's great yajna. What shall I do now?" Thus did Brihaspati brood over it until his envy affected his health. His health declined rapidly and he became thin and pale. His condition grew worse every day, until it attracted the attention of Indra himself.

Indra, chief of the gods, approached the divine preceptor and saluting him asked: "Lord, why are you ill? What has caused this languishing? Do you sleep well? Do the attendants serve you properly? Do they anticipate your wishes and not wait to be told? Do the gods behave courteously towards you or has there been any lapse in this respect?"

To Indra's anxious inquiry, Brihaspati replied: "Devaraja, I sleep on a good bed and in right time. The attendants serve me with all devotion. There is nothing wanting in the respect and courtesies shown by the gods." Then his voice failed and he could not proceed. So great was his prostration of spirit.

"Why are you grieved?" asked Indra affectionately. "Why have you grown thin and bloodless? Tell me what troubles your mind."

Brihaspati then told Indra about it all. "Samvarta is going to conduct a great yajna. It is this that has made me wan and thin. I cannot help it," said he.

Indra was surprised.

"Learned brahmana, there is no object of desire that is not already yours. You are wise and learned, and the gods themselves have accepted you as their priest and wise counsellor. What harm can Samvarta do to you? There is nothing you can lose on account of him. Why do you needlessly take upon yourself this suffering by mere envy?"

It was amusing that Indra should so far and so humanly forget his own history as to give counsel of good conduct, but

Brihaspati refreshed his memory on the point and asked: "Would you yourself delightedly watch your enemy's power growing? Judge me by how you would have felt had you been in my position. I beg of you to save me against this Samvarta. You must find a way to put this man down."

Indra sent for Agni and said to him: "Go and stop the yajna of Marutta somehow."

The god of fire agreed and went on this mission. The trees and the creepers along his path caught fire and the earth trembled as he marched roaring. He presented himself before the king in his divine form.

The king was mightily pleased to see Agni stand before him. He ordered the attendants to do all the usual honours of hospitality. "Let him be duly seated. Have his feet laved and bring the gifts proper to his greatness," said the king, and this was done.

Agni then explained why he had come. "Do give up this Samvarta. If you require a priest, I shall bring Brihaspati himself to help you."

Samvarta, who heard this, was indignant. The wrath of one who led the strict life of a brahmacharin was exceedingly potent.

"Stop this chatter!" he said to Agni. "Do not let my anger burn you up."

Fire reduces things to ashes, but brahmacharya can burn up fire itself!

At Samvarta's anger Agni, trembling like an aspen leaf, retired quickly. He returned to Indra and told him what had happened. The king of the gods could not believe the story. "Agni, you burn up other things in the world. How can anything burn you? What is this story of Samvarta's angry eyes reducing you to ashes?"

"Not so, king of the gods," said Agni. "Brahmic power and the potency born of brahmacharya are not unknown to you." Agni thus reminded Indra of what the latter had suffered, incurring the wrath of those who had attained Brahmic power.

Indra did not wrangle but called a gandharva and said: "Now, Agni has failed. I want you to go as my messenger and ask Marutta to give up Samvarta. Tell him that if he does not, he will incur my wrath and be destroyed."

The gandharva went accordingly to king Marutta and faithfully conveyed Indra's message and warning.

The king would not listen. "I cannot be guilty of the deadly sin of deserting a trusting friend," said the king: "I cannot give up Samvarta."

The gandharva said: "O king, how can you survive, when Indra hurls his bolt at you?"

Even as he said this, the clouds above thundered and everyone knew that the god of the thunderbolt was coming, and trembled in fear.

The king was in great fear and entreated Samvarta to save him.

"Fear not," said Samvarta to the king, and he proceeded to put the power of his penance into action. Indra, who had come to do battle, was compelled to change over to benevolent peace and to take part in the yajna as the radiant god of sacrifices. He received the burnt offering in proper form and retired.

Brihaspati's plan of envy failed miserably. Brahmacharya triumphed.

Envy is a deadly sin. It is a universal disease. If Brihaspati who could defeat the goddess of knowledge herself in learning became a victim to envy, what is there to say about ordinary mortals?

CHAPTER C

UTANGA

WHEN the battle was over, Krishna bade farewell to the Pandavas and went to Dwaraka. While on his way, he met his old brahmana friend Utanga. Krishna stopped and descending from his chariot saluted the brahmana. Utanga returned the greeting and proceeded to make the usual enquiries about the health and welfare of relatives.

"Madhava, do your cousins the Pandavas and the Kauravas love one another as brothers should? Are they well and flourishing?" he asked.

The innocent recluse had not heard about the great battle that had been fought. Krishna was astounded at the question of his brahmana friend. For a while, he stood silent not knowing what to say in reply. Then he softly disclosed what had happened.

"Sir, a terrible battle had been fought by the Pandavas and the Kauravas. I tried hard and applied every means to prevent the fight and make peace between them. But they would not listen. Almost all of them have perished on the field of battle. Who can stop the hand of fate?" Then he related all that had happened.

When Utanga heard the narrative, he was exceedingly wroth. With eyes red with indignation he spoke to Madhava:

"Vasudeva, were you there standing by and did you let all this happen? You have indeed failed in your duty. You have surely practised deceit and led them to destruction. Prepare now to receive my curse!"

Vasudeva smiled and said: "Peace, peace! Calm yourself. Do not use up the fruit of your great penances in this anger. Listen to what I say and then, if you like, you may pronounce your curse."

Krishna pacified the indignant brahmana and appeared to him in his all-embracing form, the Viswarupa.

"I am born in various bodies from time to time to save the world and establish the good. In whatever body I am born, I must act in conformity with the nature of that body. When I am born as a deva, I act as a deva does. If I appear as a yaksha or as a rakshasa, I do everything like a yaksha or a rakshasa. If I am born as a human being, or as a beast, I do what is natural to that birth and complete my task. I begged hard of the ignorant Kauravas. They were arrogant and intoxicated by power and paid no heed to my advice. I tried to intimidate them. Therein also I failed. I was in wrath and showed them even my Viswarupa. Even that failed to have effect. They persisted in wrong-doing. They waged war and perished. O best among brahmanas, you have no reason to be angry with me."

After this explanation of Krishna, Utanga recovered his calm. Krishna was delighted.

"I wish to give a boon to you. What would you like?" said Krishna.

"Achchyuta," said Utanga, "is it not enough I have seen Thee and Thy Form Universal? I do not desire any further boon."

But Krishna insisted and the desert-wandering simple brahmana said: "Well, my Lord, if you must give me some boon, let me find water to drink whenever I might feel thirsty. Give me this boon."

Krishna smiled. "Is this all? Have it then," he said, and proceeded on his journey.

One day Utanga was very thirsty and, unable to find water anywhere in the desert, he bethought himself of the boon he had received. As soon as he did this, a nishada appeared before him, clothed in filthy rags; he had five hunting hounds in leash and a water-skin strapped to his shoulder. The nishada grinned at Utanga and saying, "You seem to be thirsty. Here is water for you," offered the bamboo spout of his water-skin to the brahmana to drink from.

Utanga, looking at the man and his dogs and his water-skin, said in disgust: "Friend, I do not need it, thank you."

Saying this, he thought of Krishna and reproached him in his mind: "Indeed, was this all the boon you gave me?"

The outcaste nishada pressed Utanga over and over again to quench his thirst, but it only made Utanga more and more angry and he refused to drink. The hunter and his dogs disappeared.

Seeing the strange disappearance of the nishada, Utanga reflected: "Who was this? He could not have been a real nishada. It was certainly a test and I have blundered miserably. My philosophy deserted me. I rejected the water offered by the nishada and proved myself to be an arrogant fool."

Utanga was in great anguish. A moment later Madhava himself appeared with conch and discus.

"O Purushottama!" exclaimed Utanga, "you put me to a difficult trial. Was it right of you to try me thus—make an untouchable offer unclean water to me, a brahmana, to drink? Was this kind?" asked Utanga. Utanga spoke in bitter tones.

Janardana smiled. "O Utanga, for your sake, when you put my boon into action, I asked Indra to take amrita to you and give it to you as water. He said he could not give to a mortal what would give him immortality, while he was willing to do anything else. But I prevailed upon him and he agreed to take amrita and give it to you as water, provided I let him do it as a chandala and tested your understanding and found you willing to take water from a chandala. I accepted the challenge believing you had attained jnana and transcended externals. But you have done this and made me suffer defeat at Indra's hands." Utanga saw his mistake and was ashamed.

CHAPTER CI

A POUND OF FLOUR

WHEN Yudhishthira was crowned and installed as king after the Kurukshetra battle, he performed an aswamedha yajna. As was the custom on occasions of this great horse sacrifice, all the princes of the land gathered on invitation and the yajna was completed in great splendour. The brahmanas and the poor and the destitute people, who had come in great numbers from all parts of the country, received bounteous gifts. Everything was done in magnificent style and in conformity with the injunctions relating to the sacrifice.

From somewhere unseen, a weasel suddenly appeared right in the middle of the assembled guests and priests in the great pavilion and, after rolling on the ground, laughed a loud human laugh as if in derision. The priests were alarmed at this strange and unnatural occurrence and wondered whether it was some evil spirit that had come to pollute and disturb the sacred rites.

The weasel's body was on one side all shining gold. This remarkable creature turned round and took a good view of the assembly of princes and learned brahmanas that had come from various countries and gathered in that great pavilion and began to speak:

"Princes assembled and priests, listen to me. You no doubt believe that you have completed your yajna in splendid style. Once upon a time, a poor brahmana who lived in Kurukshetra, made a gift of a pound of maize flour. Your great horse sacrifice and all the gifts made in that connection are less than that small gift of the Kurukshetra brahmana. You seem to think too much of your yajna. Pray, be not so vain about it."

The gathering was amazed at this strange and impertinent speech of the golden weasel. The brahmana priests, who had performed the sacrificial rites, went up to the weasel and spoke to it:

"Wherefrom and why have you come to this yajna, performed by good and worthy men? Who are you? Why do you utter words of scorn about our sacrifice? This aswamedha has been duly completed in every detail in accordance with sastraic injunctions. It is not meet that you should speak derisively of our great sacrifice. Everyone that has come to this yajna has been duly attended to and has been accorded suitable honours and gifts. Everyone is pleased with the gifts and returns happy and contented. The mantras have been chanted perfectly and the oblations duly offered. The four castes are pleased. Why do you speak as you do? Do explain yourself."

The weasel laughed again and said:

"O brahmanas, what I said is true. I do not grudge the good fortune of king Yudhishthira or the good fortune of any of you. It is not envy that makes me say this. The yajna, which you have just completed so showily, is not in truth as great an act as that gift of the poor brahmana which I have seen. And in reward for his gift, he and his wife, son and daughter-in-law were immediately taken to swarga. Listen to my story which is a true narrative of what I saw myself.

"Long before you waged your battle there, a brahmana lived in Kurukshetra, who obtained his daily food by gleaning in the fields. He and his wife, son and daughter-in-law, all four lived in this manner. Every day in the afternoon they would sit down and have their only meal for the day. On days when they failed to find enough grain, they would fast until the next afternoon. They would not keep over any thing for the next day if they got more than they required for the day. This was the strict *unchhavritti* discipline they had pledged themselves to observe.

"They passed their days thus for many years, when a great drought came and there was famine all over the land. All cultivation ceased and there was neither sowing nor harvesting nor any grain scattered in the fields to be gleaned. For many days the brahmana and his family starved. One day, after wandering in hunger and heat, with great difficulty they came home with a small quantity of maize which they had gathered. They ground it and after saying their prayers they divided the flour into four equal parts and, offering thanks to God, sat down eagerly to eat. Just then, a brahmana entered and he was exceedingly hungry. Seeing an unexpected guest arrive, they got up and made due obeisance and asked him to join them. The pure-souled brahmana and his wife and son and daughter-in-law were exceedingly delighted to have the good fortune of receiving guest at that juncture. 'Oh best of brahmanas, I am a poor man. This flour of maize was obtained in accordance with dharma. Pray accept this. May blessings attend on you,' said the brahmana of Kurukeshetra and gave his share of the flour to the guest. The guest ate it with avidity but he was still hungry when he had finished.

"Seeing his hungry and unsatisfied look, the brahmana was grieved and did not know what to do, when his wife said: 'Lord, give my share also to him. I shall be glad if the guest's hunger be satisfied.' Saying this, she handed her share of the flour to her husband to be given to the guest.

" 'Faithful one,' said the brahmana, 'the beasts and the birds and all the animals tend the females of their species with care. May man do worse? I cannot accept your suggestion. What shall I gain in this or in the other world if I leave you to starve and suffer hunger, you who help me and serve me to do the sacred duties of a householder's life? Beloved one, you are now skin and bone and famished and exceedingly hungry. How can I leave you to suffer in that condition and hope to attain any good by feeding the guest? No, I cannot accept your offer.'

" 'You are versed in the sastras, best of brahmanas', replied the wife. 'Is it not true that dharma, artha and all the objects of human activity are to the common and equal benefit of both of us who have been joined together? Do look on me with compassion and take my share of the flour and satisfy the requirements of this our guest. You are hungry as I am and you should not make any distinction between us. I entreat you not to deny my request.'

"The bramana yielded and took the wife's share and gave it to the guest who took it greedily and ate it. But he was still hungry! Great was the distress of the poor brahmana of Kurukshetra. His son, who saw this, came forward. 'Father, here is my share,' said he. 'Give it to this guest who seems to be still hungry. I shall be indeed happy if we shall thus be able to fulfil our duty.'

"The father's distress increased. 'Child!' he exclaimed, 'old men can stand starvation. Youth's hunger is severe. I am not able to find it in my heart to accept what you say.'

"The son insisted: 'It is the duty of the son to look after his father in his declining years. The son is not different from the father. Is it not said that the father is born afresh in his son? My share of the flour is yours in truth. I beg of you to accept what I give and feed this hungry guest.'

"Dear boy, your nobility and your mastery over the senses fill me with pride. Blessing on you; I shall accept your share!' said the father, and he took the son's flour and gave it to the guest to eat. The guest ate the third part of the flour also but he was still hungry! The brahmana, who lived on scattered grain, was confused.

"While he was in distress, not knowing what to do, his daughter-in-law addressed him thus:

'Lord, I shall give my share too and gladly complete our efforts to feed this guest. I beg of you to accept it and bless me, your child, for, by that, I shall have eternal good as my reward.'

"The father-in-law was sad beyond measure. 'O girl of spotless character, pale and emaciated as you are from starvation, you propose to give your part of the food also to me, so that I may earn merit by giving it to this guest. If I accept your offer, I shall indeed be guilty of cruelty. How could I possibly look on when you wither in hunger?"

"The girl would not listen. 'Father, you are lord of my lord and master, preceptor of my preceptor, god of my god. I implore you to accept my flour. Is not this body of mine dedicated wholly to serve my lord? You should help me to attain the good. Do take this flour, I entreat you.'

"Thus implored by his daughter-in-law, the brahmana accepted her share of the flour and blessed her saying, 'Loyal girl, may every good be yours!'

"The guest received this last portion avidly and ate it and was satisfied.

"Blessed is your hospitality, given with the purest intent and to the uttermost of your capacity. Your gift has pleased me. Lo there! the gods are showering flowers in admiration of your extraordinary sacrifice. See! the gods and the gandharvas have come down in their bright chariots with their attendants to take you with your family to the happy regions above. Your gift has achieved swarga for you, as well as for your ancestors. Hunger destroys the understanding of men. It makes them go aside from the path of rectitude. It leads them to evil thoughts. The pious, when suffering the pangs of hunger, lose their steadfastness. But you have, even when hungry, bravely set aside your attachment to wife and son and placed dharma above all else. Rajasuya sacrifices and horse sacrifices completed in splendour, would pale into insignificance before the great sacrifice you have done through this single act of hospitality. The chariot is waiting for you. Enter and go to swarga, you and your family.' Saying this the mysterious guest disappeared."

Having related this story of the Kurukshetra brahmana who lived by gleaning scattered ears of corn in the field, the weasel continued:

"I was nearby and caught the fragrance wafted from that flour of the brahmana. It made my head all gold. I then went and rolled in joy on the ground where some of the flour had been scattered. It made one side of me into bright gold. I turned on the other side but there was no more flour left and that part of me is still as it was. Desirous of getting my body made all gold, I have been trying every place where men perform great yajnas and penances. I heard that Yudhishthira of world fame was performing a yajna and came here, believing that this sacrifice might come up to the standard. But I found it did not. So, I said that your great aswamedha was not so great as the gift of flour which that brahmana made to his guest." The weasel then disappeared.

CHAPTER CII

YUDHISHTHIRA RULES

MAN pursues madly the object of his desire until it is got. When it is in his possession, he is soon sated, but he becomes the slave of ever fresh longings and fresh griefs and finds no peace.

Although to fight and to kill his enemies is a kshatriya's dharma, what joy can one get out of power and position and wealth acquired by slaughter and grief inflicted on brothers and near relations? It was this that Arjuna pointed out in his powerful plea before Krishna when the battle commenced. Krishna in answer, explained the principles of man's activities and the proper discharge of one's duties. But, what Arjuna felt and argued had also a great deal of force and there was more truth in it than appeared on the surface.

The Pandavas defeated the Kauravas and became the unquestioned sovereigns of the land. They took up their duties and discharged them according to dharma. But, they found not in victory, the joy which they had expected.

"When the Pandavas won and obtained the kingdom, how did they treat Dhritarashtra?" asked king Janamejaya, and Vaisampayana, who recited Vyasa's Mahabharata to the king, tells the story.

Dhritarashtra, who was plunged in a sea of grief, was treated by the Pandavas with the utmost respect. They tried to make him happy. They did nothing to make him feel humiliated. Yudhishthira issued no orders except with his approval. Gandhari, whose hundred sons had disappeared like dream-gold, was looked after by Kuntidevi with loving and sisterly devotion and Draupadi dutifully ministered to them both, with equal respect. Yudhishthira furnished Dhritarashtra's house with rich seats and beds and decorations and all else that was wanted. He sent from the royal kitchen most dainty and palatable dishes prepared for him. Kripacharya lived with Dhritarashtra and kept him company. Vyasa comforted him with instructive stories of olden times, calculated to assuage his sorrow. In the administration of affairs of the State, Yudhishthira consulted Dhritarashtra and conducted himself so as to give him the feeling that in truth the kingdom was ruled on his behalf and that he, as the eldest member of the family, was still the supreme authority. Yudhishthira was most careful in his speech, never to allow himself to say anything to cause pain to the bereaved old man. The princes, who came to Hastinapura from all parts of the world, gave Dhritarashtra the same honours as they did of old, as if he were still the emperor. The women attendants gave Gandhari no occasion to feel her fallen estate. Yudhishthira had instructed his brothers most strictly that nothing should be done to cause the slighest pain to their uncle, who had lost all his sons. The brothers, with perhaps the exception of Bhima, followed this injunction faithfully. Dhritarashtra too conducted himself lovingly towards the Pandavas. He showed no ill-will towards them even as he was shown no unkindness by them.

The Pandavas behaved unexceptionably towards their old uncle. After a time, however, Bhima began on occasions to give cause for offence. He would sometimes, in impatience, countermand the old man's instructions. He would let fall in Dhritarashtra's hearing words like "Those perverse cousins of ours have themselves to thank for their destruction." It was not possible for Bhima to forget or forgive Duryodhana, Karna or Duhsasana. Gandhari felt intensely grieved when she noticed that Bhima uttered words which pained Dhritarashtra. She was, however, a noble and enlightened soul. Whenever she felt pained at what Bhima said, she would look at Kunti and find peace. For Kunti was a veritable embodiment of dharma and inspired forbearance. Fifteen years passed in this manner.

CHAPTER CIII

DHRITARASHTRA

FIFTEEN years passed under king Yudhishthira's reign, when old Dhritarashtra found himself utterly unable any longer to bear the burden of grief. Hurt by Bhima's occasional reproaches, he found no heart to accept the courtesies and comforts provided under king Yudhishthira's orders. Unknown to the Pandavas, he secretly fasted and underwent hard penances. Gandhari too observed many fasts and inflicted privation on herself. And one day Dhritarashtra sent for Dharmaputra and spoke to him thus:

"Son, blessings on you. I have spent fifteen happy years under your roof. You have tended me most lovingly. I have made gifts and offerings to ancestors and fulfilled all my desires in that respect. Bereaved Gandhari, laying aside her own grief, has ministered to my physical wants all these years. My cruel sons, who committed unforgivable wrong to Draupadi and deprived you of your lawful inheritance, perished on account of their sins. But they fought like brave soldiers and died in the battlefield and have gone to the happy regions reserved for the brave. The time has come when with Gandhari I must do what has to be done for our next state. You know what the sastras have laid down. I must now go to the forest. These robes must be replaced by bark and tattered old clothes, suitable for the life of Vanaprasthas. I desire to go and live in the forest, praying for your good. I want your permission for this. Let me follow the practice of our fathers. As king, you will share in the fruits of my penance."

Yudhishthira received a shock when he saw Dhritarashtra and heard him say this. "I did not know," he said, "that you had been fasting and sleeping on the bare ground and mortifying your flesh in this manner. My brothers too were unaware of this. I was misled into believing you were well looked after and happy. Father, you have suffered grief, for which there can be no solace. I see no good in kingdom or pleasures. I am a sinner. Desire and ambition deceived me into this. Let your son Yuyutsu be king, or any one else you choose. Or if you will do so, you yourself may take up the duties of king and look after the people. I shall go to the forest. Let me terminate this chapter of error. I implore you to save me from further obloquy and burning shame. I am not the king. You are the king. You ask me for permission to go. How then can I give or refuse permission to you? Let me assure you that my anger against Duryodhana is a thing of the past, gone without a trace. Fate willed it and engulfed us all in confusion of mind, and events happened which were not in our control. We are your children, even like Duryodhana and his brothers. Gandhari and Kunti are alike mother to me and command equal regard and filial affection from me, their child. If you go away to the forest, I must go with you and serve you there. If you retire to the woods and leave me here, what joy shall I have in kingship? I prostrate myself before you and implore you to forgive the errors we have been guilty of. Serving you will give me true joy and peace of mind. Give me that opportunity and privilege. Do not desert me."

Dhritarashtra was deeply moved. But he said: "Kunti's beloved son, my mind is fixed on going to the forest and on penance. I can find no peace otherwise now. I have lived under your roof for many years. You and all your people have served me with unstinted devotion. You must permit me now to fulfil my wish and let me go."

Having thus spoken to Yudhishthira, who stood with clasped hands and trembling with agitation, Dhritarashtra turned to Vidura and Kripacharya.

"I beg of you to comfort the king and make him grant my prayer. My mind is fixed on the forest. I am unable to speak any more. I am feeling dry in my throat. Perhaps, it is due to age. I have talked too much. I am tired." Saying this, he leaned helplessly on Gandhari and swooned.

Yudhishthira was unable to bear this distress of the grand old man, who had possessed the sinews of an elephant and had had strength enough to crush the metal figure of Bhima into powder. How lean he had become now and emaciated, with his bones showing through his skin, piteously leaning senseless on Gandhari like one destitute?

"Have I caused all this?" he reproached himself. "Miserable and unworthy am I, ignorant of dharma, devoid of intelligence. A curse on my learning!"

He sprinkled water on Dhritarashtra's face and caressingly stroked him with his soft hands. When the old man recovered, he tenderly clasped the Pandava to his bosom and muttered: "My dear boy, how sweet is your touch! I am happy."

Then Vyasa entered. When he was acquainted with what had happened, he said to Yudhishthira: "Do what Dhritarashtra, eldest of the Kurus, desires. Let him go to the forest. He is old. All his sons have gone before him. It is not possible for him much longer to bear his grief. Gandhari, whom God has blessed with enlightenment, has borne her sorrows with courage. Do not stand in the way of their wishes. Let not Dhritarashtra pine away and die here. Let him go and live among the honeyladen flowers of the forest and breathe their fragrance, leaving the cares of the world behind. The dharma of kings is to die in battle or to spend their last days in retirement in the forest. Dhritarashtra has ruled the kingdom and performed yajnas. When you were in the wilderness for thirteen years, he enjoyed the wide earth through his son and gave bounteous gifts. You left him nothing to desire. The time has come for him to do penance. Let him go with your hearty consent, and without anger in his heart."

Dharmaraja said: "So be it!"

Then Vyasa returned to his hermitage.

CHAPTER CIV

THE PASSING AWAY OF THE THREE

WHEN Yudhishthira at last gave his consent for Dhritarashtra's retirement to the forest, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari went back to their residence and broke their fast. Kunti sat with Gandhari and they ate together. Dhritarashtra asked Yudhishthira to sit by him and gave him his last blessings. Then the old man stepped out and, with his hand resting on Gandhari's shoulder, slowly walked out of the city on his journey to the forest. Gandhari, who, because her lord and husband was blind, gave up the use of her eyes and wrapped her face with a napkin all her life, placed her hand on Kunti's shoulder and slowly walked along, thus guided.

Kunti had decided in her mind to go with Gandhari to the forest. As she walked on, she was speaking to Yudhishthira: "Son, do not ever let your speech be angry when you speak to Sahadeva. Remember with love Karna who died a hero's death on the battlefield. He was my son, but I committed the crime of not disclosing it to you. Look after Draupadi with unfailing tenderness. Do not ever give cause for grief to Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. Keep this ever in mind, son; the burden of the family is now wholly on you."

Dharmaputra had till then believed that Kunti was accompanying Gandhari only for a distance to say good-bye to her. When he heard her speak thus, he was taken aback and was speechless for a few minutes. When he recovered from the shock he said: "Mother, not thus! You blessed us and sent us to battle. It is not right you should now desert us and go to the forest."

Yudhishthira's entreaties were however of no avail. Kunti held to her purpose.

"I must join my lord and husband wherever he be now. I shall be with Gandhari and go through the discipline of forest life and soon join your father. Go back unagitated. Return to the city. May your mind ever stand steady on dharma." Thus did Kunti bless her illustrious-son and depart.

Yudhishthira stood speechless. Kunti went on her way, looking back occasionally at him and her other sons. Each with hand on the shoulder of the other, this picture of the three elders of the tribe wending their way to the forest, leaving their sons behind, is painted by the poet so vividly that it fills the reader with solemn grief, as if the parting happened in his own family now.

Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti spent three years in the forest. Sanjaya was with them. When one day, Dhritarashtra finished his ablutions and returned to their hermitage, the forest had caught fire. The wind blew and the flames spread everywhere. The deer and the wild boars ran in herds hither and thither, and rushed madly to the pools. Dhritarashtra told Sanjaya: "This fire will envelop us all. You had better save yourself." Saying this, the blind old king, Gandhari with her eyes blindfolded and Kunti sat down on the ground, the three of them, facing eastwards in yoga posture and calmly gave themselves up to the flames.

Sanjaya, who had been to the blind king, throughout all his days, his only light and was dear to him like life itself, spent the rest of his days in the Himalayas as a sanyasin.

CHAPTER CV

KRISHNA PASSES AWAY

KRISHNA ruled at Dwaraka for thirty-six years after the Kurukshetra battle was over. The Vrishnis, the Bhopas and other branches of the Yadavas belonging to Krishna's tribe spent their days in unrestrained self-indulgence and luxury. They lost all sense of discipline and humility.

Once, some rishis came to Dwaraka. The arrogant and irreverent Yadavas mocked these rishis with a practical joke. They dressed up one of their young men like a woman and, presenting him to the revered guests, said: "O ye learned men, tell us whether this lady will have a boy or a girl."

The rishis saw through the irreverent joke and said in anger: "This person will give birth to a mace, not a boy or a girl and that mace will prove to be Yama to your tribe and destroy you all." The rishis departed after pronouncing this curse.

The foolish Yadavas were rather perturbed at this unpleasant ending of what they had thought was a good joke. Next day, they were in consternation to see that Samba, the man who had been dressed up in female clothes, developed labour pains and lo and behold, gave birth to a mace! This filled them with terror because they felt that their end was near as the rishis had cursed.

They deliberated long and finally ground the mace to fine powder which they scattered in the sea, and thought they had thus disposed of the danger. Nothing happened for some time. Seasons passed. The rains came and on the beach, near where they had strewn the fine dust of the awful club, there sprang up a dense, crop of rushes. When the Yadavas saw this, they were curious and amused, for they had forgotten all about the curse of the revered guests.

One day, long after, the Yadavas went to the beach for a picnic and spent the whole day in dance and drink and revelry. The liquor began to work. At first merry, then pugnacious, they began to talk without restrain, raking up old offences and quarrelling on slight cause with one another.

Among the Yadavas, Kritavarma had fought on the side of the Kauravas and Satyaki on that of the Pandavas.

"Would any kshatriya attack and kill sleeping soldiers, O Kritavarma? You have brought a great and lasting disgrace on our tribe," said Satyaki, taunting Kritavarma; and a number of drunken Yadavas acclaimed the attack. Kritavarma could not bear the insult.

"Like a butcher, you slaughtered the great Bhurisravas when seated in yoga after his right hand was cut off and you, coward, dare to taunt me," he exclaimed and a number of the revellers joined him and began to scoff at Satyaki for his barbarous deed.

Soon, all the Yadavas were in the quarrel on one side or the other and presently from words they came to blows, which swiftly developed into a free fight. Satyaki, with his sword drawn, sprang upon Kritavarma and swept his head off, exclaiming: "Here is the end of the coward who killed sleeping soldiers!"

Others immediately fell upon Satyaki with their drinking bowls and pots and anything they could lay hands upon.

Pradyumna, Krishna's son, joined the fray to rescue Satyaki and there was a desperate melee in which both Satyaki and Pradyumna were killed. Krishna knew that the destined hour was come, and plucking the tall rushes which fringed the beach laid about him with them indiscriminately. This led to everyone of the Yadavas doing the same and there was great indiscriminate slaughter. The rishis' curse had begun to work.

The rushes that had grown out of the mace became each one of them a mace as it was plucked by the doomed men in their insensate fury. They used them on one another with deadly effect and soon all of them were destroyed in this drunken brawl.

Balarama, who was seeing all this, was overwhelmed with shame and disgust and sank to the ground. He gave up his life as he lay in a yoga trance and passed away into the ocean in a stream of light which issued from his forehead like a silver serpent. Thus ended the avatar of Narayana in Balarama.

Krishna saw all his people thus destroy themselves as predestined. When he saw the passing of Balarama, he roamed about in deep meditation in the wilderness, pondering on the completion of his avatar. "The time has come for me to go," he said to himself and, lying on the ground, fell asleep.

In that wooded beach, a hunter, prowling for game, saw Vasudeva lying on the ground among the shrubs and, from a distance, mistook him for a wild animal resting on the ground. He bent his bow and shot an arrow at the prostrate figure which, piercing his foot in the instep, went full through his body. Thus did the great Vasudeva depart from the world of men.

CHAPTER CVI

YUDHISHTHIRA'S FINAL TRIAL

To Hastinapura came the sad tidings of the death of Vasudeva and the destruction of the Yadavas. When the Pandavas received the news, they lost all remaining attachment to life on earth. They crowned Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu, as emperor and the five brothers left the city with Draupadi. They went out on a pilgrimage, visiting holy places and finally reached the Himalayas. A dog joined them somewhere and kept them company all along, and the seven of them climbed the mountain on their last pilgrimage. As they toiled up the mountain path one by one fell exhausted and died. The youngest succumbed first. Draupadi, Sahadeva and Nakula were released from the burden of the flesh one after another. Then followed Arjuna and then great Bhima too. Yudhishthira saw these dear ones fall and die. Yet, serenely he went on not giving way to grief, for the light of Truth burned bright before him and he knew what was shadow and what was substance. The dog still followed Yudhishthira. The lesson enforced by the poet in this episode of the dog is that dharma is the only constant companion in life's journey. It was dharma who, in the shape of the dog, followed Yudhishthira up the wearisome mountain path, when his brothers and wife had gone leaving him alone.

Finally, when he reached a great height, Indra appeared in his chariot.

"Your brothers and Draupadi have arrived before you. You have lagged behind, burdened with your body. Ascend my chariot and go with me in the flesh. I have come to take you," said Indra. But when Yudhishthira went up to take his seat in Indra's chariot, the dog also climbed up.

"No, no," said Indra. "There is no place for dogs in swarga," and pushed the dog away.

"Then there is no room for me either," said Yudhishthira, and refused to enter the heavenly chariot if he had to leave his faithful companion behind.

Dharma had come to test Yudhishthira's loyalty and he was pleased with his son's conduct. The dog vanished from sight.

Yudhishthira reached swarga. There, he saw Duryodhana. The Kuru prince was seated on a beautiful throne and he shone with the splendour of the sun and around him stood in attendance the goddess of heroism and other angels. He did not see his brothers or anyone else.

Yudhishthira was astonished.

"Where are my brothers, ye denizens of swarga?" asked Yudhishthira. "This man of greed, of limited vision, is here. I do not care to spend my time in his company. We were driven by this man's envy and spite to kill friends and relatives. We stood tied by dharma to inaction when, before our eyes, innocent Panchali, united to us in sacred wedlock, was dragged to the Hall of the Assembly and insulted under the orders of this wicked man. I cannot bear the sight of this man. Tell me, where are my brothers? I wish to go where they are." Saying this Yudhishthira averted his eyes from where Duryodhana was seated in glory.

Then Narada, the heavenly rishi of encyclopaedic knowledge, smiled disapprovingly at Yudhishthira and said:

"Renowned prince, this is not right. In swarga, we harbour no ill-will. Do not speak in this manner about Duryodhana. The brave Duryodhana has attained his present state by force of kshatriya dharma. It is not right to let the things of the flesh stay in the mind and breed ill-will. Do follow the law and stay here with king Duryodhana. There is no place in swarga for hatred. You have arrived here with your human body; so it is that you have these inappropriate feelings. Discard them, son!"

Yudhishthira replied:

"O sage, Duryodhana, who did not know right from wrong, who was a sinner, who caused suffering to good men, who fed enmity and anger and who brought death to countless men, has attained this swarga of warriors. Where is that region of greater glory, which must be the abode of my brave and good brothers and Draupadi? I am eager to see them and Karna, and also all the friends and princes who gave up their lives in battle for me; I do not see them here. I desire to meet again Virata, Drupada, Dhrishtaketu and Sikhandin, the Panchala prince. I long to see the dear sons of Draupadi and Abhimanyu. I do not see them here. Where are they, who threw their bodies into the blazing fire of battle for my sake, like ghee in the sacrifice? I do not see any of them here. Where are they all? My place must be among them. At the close of the battle, my mother Kunti wanted me to offer libations for Karna also. When I think of it, even now, grief overwhelms me. In ignorance of his being my own blood-brother, I caused Karna to be slain. I am eager to see him, Bhima, dearer to me than life, Arjuna, who was like Indra himself, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva and our dear Panchali, steadfast in dharma. I long to see and be with them all. I do not wish to be in heaven, for what good is it for me to be here, away from my brothers? Wherever they may be, that to me is swarga; not this place!"

The angels, who heard this, replied:

"O Yudhishthira, if you indeed desire to be with them, by all means, you may go at once. There is no need to delay," and they ordered an attendant to take Yudhishthira.

So, the messenger proceeded in front and Yudhishthira followed him. As they went along, it soon became dark and in the gathering gloom could be dimly seen things weird and revolting. He waded through slippery slime of blood and offal. The path was strewn with carrion and bones and dead men's hair. Worms were wriggling everywhere and there was an insufferable stench in the air. He saw mutilated human bodies everywhere.

Yudhishthira was horrified and confused. A thousand thoughts tortured his mind as he proceeded.

"How far have we to go yet on this road? Where indeed are my brothers? Tell me, my friend," he enquired of the messenger in deep anguish.

The messenger quietly replied: "if you so desire, we may turn back."

The foul odours of the place were so sickening that for a moment Yudhishthira was minded to go back. But just then, as if divining his intentions, vaguely familiar voices rose all around in loud lamentation.

"O Dharmaputra, do not go back! Stay here for a few minutes at least. Your presence has given us momentary relief from torture. As you came, you have brought with you a whiff of air so sweet and pure that we have found a little relief in our agony. Son of Kunti, the very sight of you gives us comfort and mitigates our suffering. O stay, be it for ever so short a time. Do not go back. While you are here, we enjoy a respite in our torture." Thus the voices pleaded.

Hearing the loud lamentations that thus came from all around him, Yudhishthira stood in painful bewilderment. Overwhelmed with pity at the poignant anguish in faintly remembered voices, he exclaimed:

"Alas wretched souls! Who be ye that lament like this? Why are you here?"

"Lord, I am Karna," said a voice.

"I am Bhima," said another.

"I am Arjuna," cried a third voice.

"Draupadi," cried another voice in piteous tone.

"I am Nakula," "I am Sahadeva," "We are Draupadi's sons," and so on, came dolorous voices from all around, till the accumulated pain was more than Yudhishthira could bear.

"What sin indeed have these been guilty of?" cried he. "Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana, what good deeds did he do to sit like Mahendra in heaven, while these are in hell? Am I dreaming or am I awake? Is my mind deranged? Have I gone crazy?"

Overwhelmed by anger, Yudhishthira cursed the gods and denounced dharma. He turned to the angel-attendant and said sharply: "Go back to your masters. I shall stay here where my dear brothers, for no other sin than devotion to me, are consigned to the tortures of hell. Let me be with them."

The messenger went back and conveyed to Indra what Yudhishthira had said.

Thus passed the thirteenth part of a day. Then Indra and Yama appeared before Yudhishthira where he stood in anguish. When they came, the darkness rolled away and the horrid sights disappeared. The sinners and their sufferings were no more to be seen. A fragrant breeze blew as Yama, the god of dharma, smiled on his son Yudhishthira.

"Wisest of men, this is the third time I have tested you You chose to remain in hell for the sake of your brothers. It is inevitable that kings and rulers must go through hell if only for a while. So it was that for the thirtieth part of a day you too were doomed to suffer the pangs of hell. Neither the illustrious Savyasachi nor your beloved brother Bhima is really in hell. Nor Karna, the just, nor any one else who you thought had been consigned to suffering. It was an illusion designed to test you. This is not hell—but swarga. Do you not see there Narada whose peregrinations cover the three worlds? Cease grieving."

Thus said Yama to Dharmaputra who, thereupon, was transfigured. The mortal frame was gone and he was a god. With the disappearance of the human body, also disappeared all trace of anger and hatred. Then Yudhishthira saw there Karna and all his brothers and the sons of Dhritarashtra also, serene and free from anger, all having attained the state of the gods. In this reunion, Yudhishthira at last found peace and real happiness.

GLOSSARY

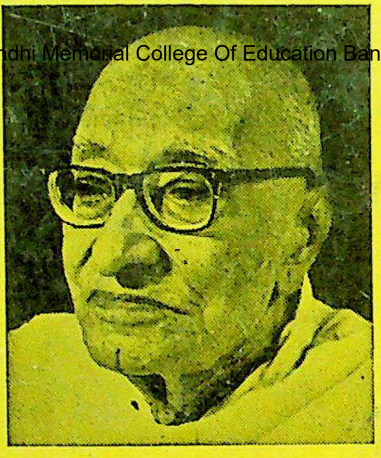
Acharya	Teacher or Guru.
Ajatasatru	Having no enemy; friend of all born things: an epithet of Yudhishthira.
Amrit	Ambrosia, the food of the gods, which makes the partaker immortal.
Arani	An upper and a lower piece of wood used for producing fire by attrition.
Artha	Wealth; one of the objects of human life—the others being Dharma (righteousness), Kama (satisfaction of desires), Moksha (spiritual salvation).
Astra	A missile charged with power by a holy incantation.
Brahmacharin	A religious student, unmarried, who lives with his spiritual guide, devoted to study and service.
Brahmacharya	Celibacy, chastity; the stage of life of Vedic study in which chastity and service are essential.
Chandala	A person of a degraded caste, whose conduct was much below standard and whose contact was supposed to cause pollution.
Chavadi	Place of public assembly of the village. It is the property of the entire community. In it all public business is transacted, and it serves also as the village club, the head-quarters of the village police and guest house for benighted travellers.
Dharma	Righteous course of conduct.
Dharmananda	The delighter of Dharma—a name of Yudhishthira, the son of Dharma or Yama.
Dharmaputra	The son of Yama—epithet of Yudhishthira.
Dhartarashtras	Sons of Dhritarashtra.
Gandharvas	A class of celestial beings regarded as specialists in music.

Govinda	One of the epithets of Sri Krishna and Vishnu; it means a cow-keeper and refers to Krishna's occupation in Gokula, the colony of cowherds.
Guru	Revered preceptor, teacher.
Halayudha	Plough-weaponed—an epithet of Balarama who wielded a plough as his weapon.
Janardana	A name of Krishna.
Jnana	Knowledge of the eternal and real.
Krauncha	Curlew — heron. Krauncha-vyuha: military formation on a pattern supposed to resemble a heron with outstretched beak and spreading wings. In ancient Indian practice, armies were arrayed for battle in formations of definite patterns, each of which had a name—such as *Chakra*, or *Kurma*, or *Krauncha*. or *Makara* according to a real or fancied resemblance.
Kurma	Tortoise.
Madhava	One of the names of Krishna. It means the Lord of Lakshmi.
Madhusudana	Another name of Krishna, the slayer of the asura Madhu.
Mantra	An incantation with words of power.
Nishada	An aboriginal hunter or fisherman; a man of low or degraded tribe in general, an outcaste.
Palasa	*Butea frondosa*; "flame of the forest."
Pitamaha	Literally grand-father—which however carries no imputation of senile infirmity but denotes the status of *Pater familias*.
Purushottama	An epithet of Sri Krishna. It is one of the names of Vishnu and means Supreme Being.
Radheya	Son of Radha; a name of Karna, who as a foundling was brought up as a son by Radha the wife of the Charioteer Adhiratha.

Rishabha	The second note of the Indian gamut (Shadja, rishabha, gandhara, madhyama, panchama, daivata, nishada—*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni.*)
Sairandhri	A maid servant or female attendant employed in royal female apartments.
Samsaptaka	One who has taken a vow to conquer or die, and never to retreat. The samsaptakas were suicide-squads, vowed to some desperate deed of derring-do.
Sankula yuddha	A melee, confused fight, a soldiers' battle as distinguished from the combats of heroes.
Sanyasin	One who has renounced the world and its concerns.
Savyasachin	Ambidexter—one who can use both hands with equal facility and effect. A name of Arjuna who could use his bow with the same skill with either hand.
Simhanada	A lion-note or roar; a deep roar of defiance or triumph which warriors were wont to utter to inspire confidence in their friends, or terror in their enemies.
Swarga	The heaven of Indra where mortals after death enjoy the results of their good deeds on earth.
Unchhavritti	The life of a mendicant, begging his food.
Vaishnava mantra	An invocation which endows a missile with some of the irresistible power of Vishnu.
Vanaprastha	The third stage of a *dvija's* life, when he is required to relinquish worldly responsibilities to his heirs, and retire to the woods with his wife for an anchorite's life.

Vasudeva	An epithet of Krishna. It means, either, son of Vasudeva or the Supreme Spirit that pervades the universe.
Viswarupa	All-pervading, all-including form. See the description in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Ch. XI.
Vrikodara	Wolf-bellied—an epithet of Bhima, denoting his slimness of waist and insatiable hunger.
Vyuha	Battle array.
Yajna	Sacrifice.
Yakshas	A class of demi-gods, subjects of Kubera, the god of wealth.

G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu
Acc. No.... 3077(D)
Date 2/2/2016



THE AUTHOR

CHAKRAVARTI RAJAGOPALACHARI, popularly known as "Rajaji" or "C.R.", was a great patriot, astute politician, incisive thinker, and one of the greatest statesmen. A close associate of Mahatma Gandhi, he was an ardent freedom-fighter. In his capacity successively as Chief Minister of Madras, Governor of West Bengal, Home Minister and the first Indian Governor-General of India he rendered yeoman service to the country and left an indelible impress on our contemporary life.

Rajaji's books on *Marcus Aurelius*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* are popular. But in *Mahabharata* he displays his inimitable flair for telling stories and applying their moral to the needs of modern times. The stories were originally written in Tamil and have been rendered into English, mainly by Rajaji himself. To have preserved the beauty and spirit of the great original in refined and simple English is an achievement of the highest order.

Rajaji passed away in 1972 at the age of 94.